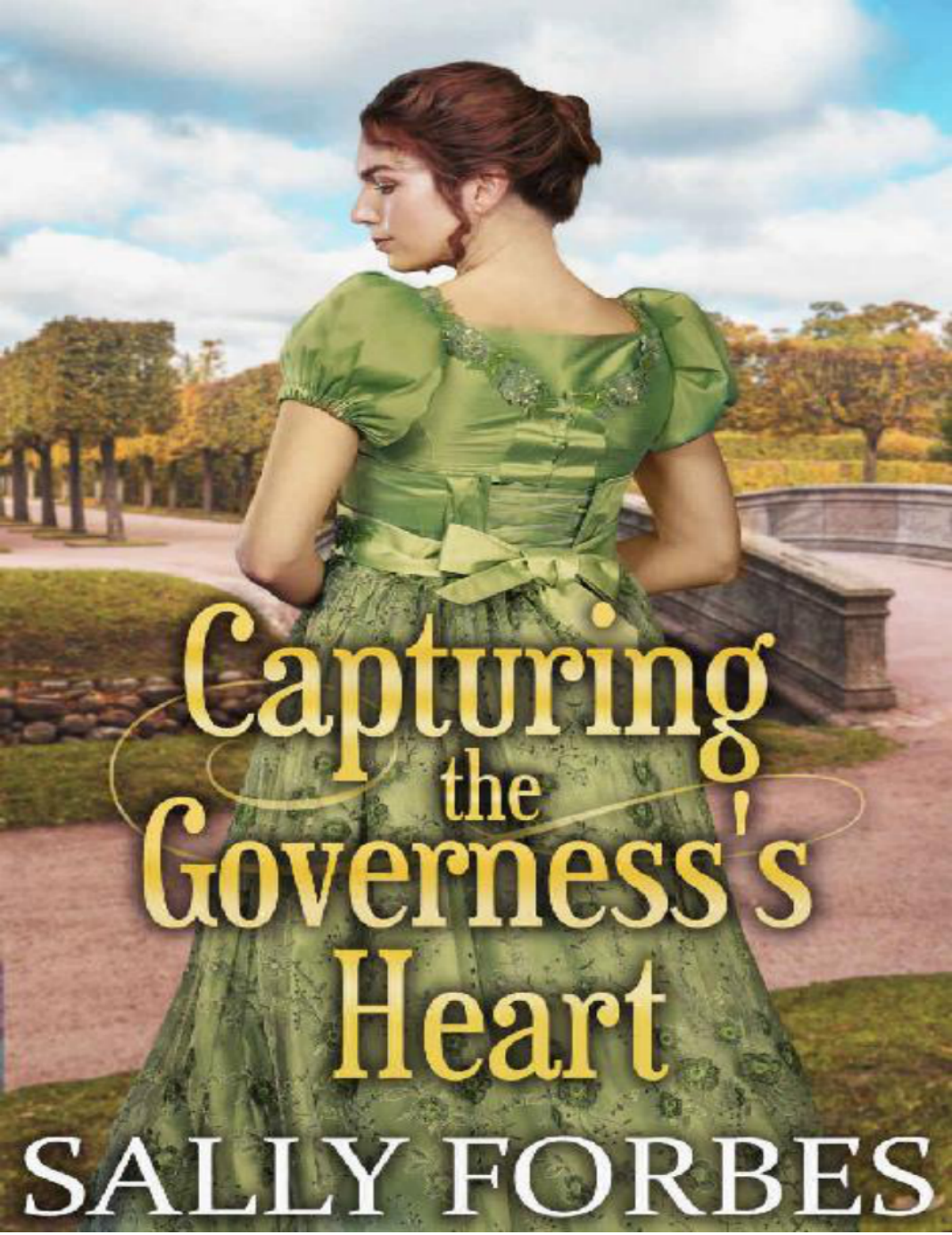
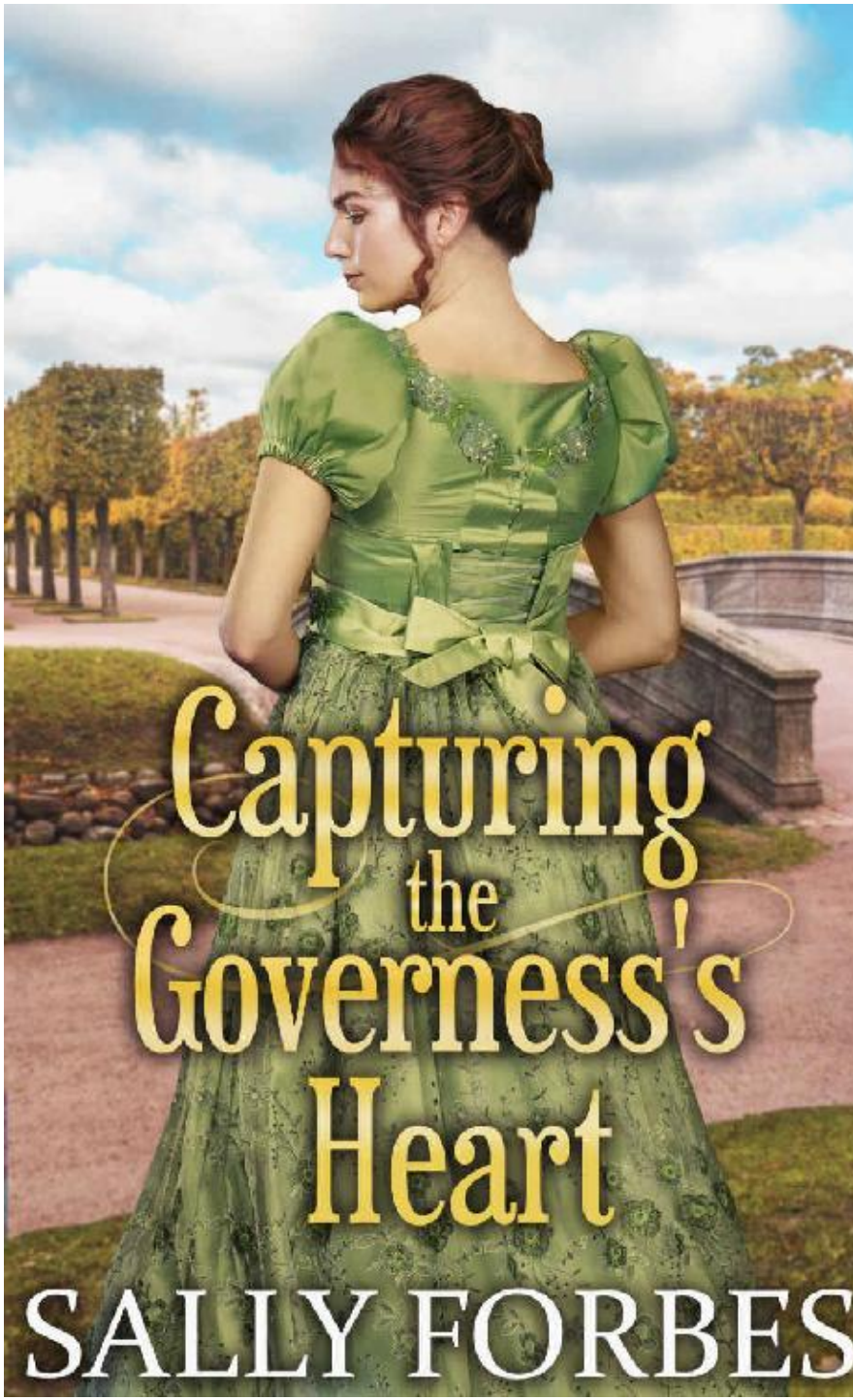

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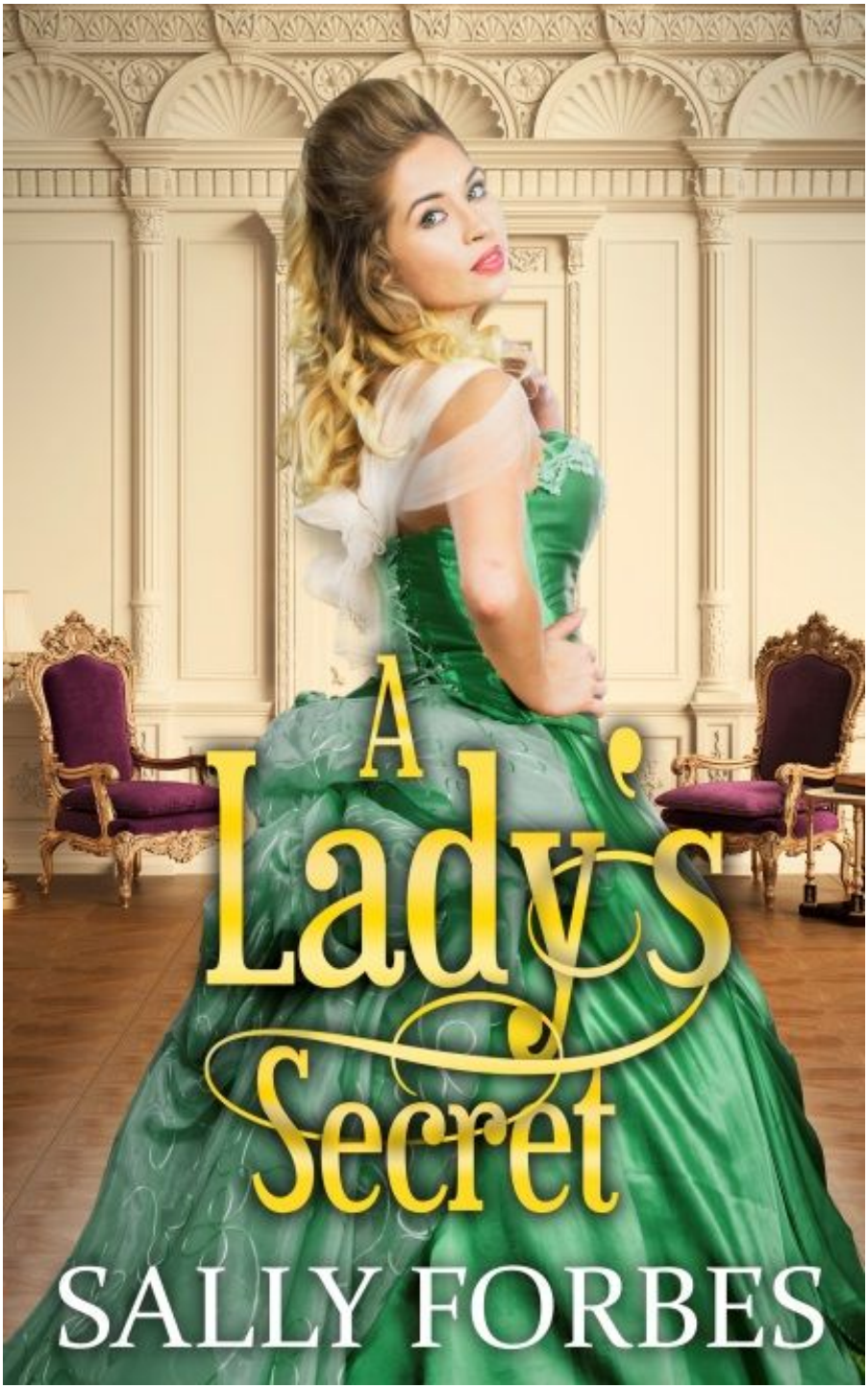
Capturing the Governess's Heart

A HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

Sally Forbes

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SALLY FORBES

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Prologue

The trot and clatter of carriages, and the calls of people on the street below, were an unwelcome clamor to Emma. She wondered why they seemed louder today of all days, and then she heard, or rather felt, the heavy silence of her own home.

The servants barely stirred; they were clustered together in the kitchen, waiting for news of their beloved mistress. Emma's father and the physician had shut the door of her mother's sickroom firmly, and she couldn't hear anything but low murmurs from her perch on the second-story window seat. All she could hear was the rush and chatter of everyday life continuing below, and the contrast hurt more than her ears.

The busy harbor-town of Whitehaven, England, bustled on through the warm spring weather without a second glance at the available townhome or the wan face at the window. Emma turned from the sights below and clutched a handkerchief close to her heart.

With its painted silk wallpaper and white crown molding, her mother's bright sitting room was full of sunlight, but even it couldn't fill the emptiness Emma felt. Mrs. Fletcher's sickness had carved away the long days of happiness and laughter that had filled her daughters' childhood.

Elizabeth, Emma's younger sister, hadn't noticed the absences yet and played with her doll on the sunny, yellow sofa in just the same carefree way as she would on any other day.

Mrs. Fletcher and her daughters had often spent cheerful hours of their mornings in her sitting room, but it had now been a week since she had joined them. The door to the Mister bedroom remained closed as their mother's illness took more and more from her.

"Now, Angela, you should smooth your skirts like this when you sit. Those wrinkles and lumps are quite unsightly," Elizabeth chided her doll.

Emma's eyes filled with tears as she looked at her sister. Elizabeth's doll was a prized possession and companion. Her wooden hands and feet were worn smooth by caresses, and the glossy paint on her face had faded under countless kisses. Mrs. Fletcher indulged eleven-year-old Elizabeth, always making sure the precious doll had beautiful dresses, all embroidered with butterflies. Covered with delicate wings and crowned with a cherubic face, the doll had been called Angel La La for nearly a decade. Elizabeth called her by her given name and spoke to the doll of nothing but etiquette, receiving calls, the newest fashions, and balls.

How would Elizabeth ever attend the much-craved-for London Season without a mother to guide her?

Emma stood up and paced across the sitting room to the gilded fireplace. She was fifteen and eager to grow into womanhood, but the thought now filled her with fear.

"Miss Fletcher?" The physician's quiet tone startled Emma, and she could make no response except to turn her reddened eyes towards the

dreaded door where he stood. “Your mother would like to see you now. Please come in.”

Elizabeth fell silent and pulled her doll into her lap. “Should I come, Emma?”

“No, love. You stay here. I’m sure Mother is tired and will want to rest when we’re done. I’ll come and tell you everything later.” Emma promised.

How was she going to tell her sister their mother was dying?

The fearsome question turned her feet to lead, but the kindly physician took her arm and guided her into Mrs. Fletcher’s sickroom. Emma blinked fast to fight back her tears and adjust her eyes to the shadowed room. After her mother’s sunny sitting room, the Mister bedroom was cool and dark.

She paused stiffly near the door and felt as if she were intruding. The Mister bedroom was a private realm, one of the only rooms Emma

and her sister did not frequent. They had the run of the townhome from the basement kitchen to the back gardens and even the polished and formal front parlor, but their parent's bedroom was a separate sanctuary Emma now invaded unwillingly.

It was a surprisingly masculine room, with dark-painted walls and heavy curtains. Her father's dresser and wardrobe were squared and sturdy, and the four-poster bed was imposing. The curtains were drawn back there, and Mrs. Fletcher's delicate face was all but lost amongst the white pillows.

"Mr. Fletcher? Your eldest daughter has come." The physician spoke in a voice that was barely more than a murmur, clearly afraid of startling the man standing by the bed.

"Yes. Yes. Of course." A shudder ran down Mr. Fletcher's spine, but he did not turn to greet Emma.

Her father was a kind, industrious man whose head for business had elevated him to a prominent shipping merchant position. He was a

pillar of Whitehaven, his name well-respected in the harbor, and he'd secured a good living for his family. Unfortunately, it was that very business that had made him a near-stranger to his daughters. He was gone for long hours each day, worked nearly every day of the week, and traveled often.

Now, Mr. Fletcher gave Emma a stiff hug but had no words of comfort to say. He left the room quickly by the hall door, passing a footman who waited silently with wide eyes before hurrying downstairs to his study.

"Emma, dearest, come closer." Her mother's pale hand groped for her daughter's; the sick woman seemed hardly strong enough to lift her eyelids and look at her.

"I'm here, Mother." Emma managed to keep the sob from her voice by swallowing it hard. She rushed forward and took her mother's cold hand.

"Joy of my days. Both of you girls. Such lovely young women."

Mrs. Fletcher forced her bloodshot eyes open and beheld her daughter. "How I would have loved to see you dance."

"I don't care for balls, Mama. I never have," Emma assured her.

Mrs. Fletcher smiled, and her weak hand fluttered towards the bedside table. "Your drawings have taken me out of this room and down to the waterside, my dear. Thank you."

Emma looked at the sketches she had done of the harbor and fought back another tide of tears. "We'll go there again together," she whispered fiercely.

Sudden, tearing coughs racked Mrs. Fletcher's slight body, and Emma hurried to support her mother and fluff up the pillows behind her. The physician stepped forward with a draught, and a few forced sips helped her mother find her voice again.

"You must promise me you'll take care of Elizabeth. She needs you, and I need to know my girls will be together." Mrs. Fletcher writhed

with the effort of speaking. “Promise me.”

“Yes. I promise. I will take care of Elizabeth.” Emma gripped her mother’s frail hand and tried to keep the panic out of her voice.

“And … my love?”

“Yes, Mother. I’m still here.”

“Whenever you feel lonely, you will look at the stars. I’ll be there, my precious girl. I will always be watching over you.” Mrs. Fletcher’s voice faded to a rasp and then dropped away to pained silence.

“I will always love you, mother, and you will always be in my thoughts!”

Mrs. Fletcher’s hand went limp, but her chest still rose and fell in shallow breaths. The physician stepped in and called for the footman to fetch Emma’s father. All Emma could do was step back from her

mother and hold tight to the promise she'd made.

Chapter One

Five years later, Emma awoke in the night. Elizabeth lay nestled beside her in the big bed they shared, and she was grateful for her sister's warm presence. Now fifteen, Elizabeth was growing into her sharp limbs, and she no longer flailed about in her sleep.

She used to dream and call out, grieving their lost mother, and Emma had often been awakened by the hard rap of her sister's precious doll against her head. Emma sat up cautiously and saw Elizabeth's doll propped up on a shelf across the room. Unable to find the cause of her sudden waking, Emma slipped silently from the bed and wrapped a shawl around her shoulders.

The summer weather had finally started to fade, and there was a chill in the air. Five beautiful summers full of flowers and long days spent admiring the sparkling water of the harbor. Five long summers her mother had missed.

Emma pressed a hand to her chest but still could not fill the emptiness. Life had not been a hardship, and their circumstances had not changed, and yet, Emma felt her whole world had been tumbled like the rocks on the beach.

She turned and tucked Elizabeth under the covers securely. Her younger sister needed someone to tend to her needs, guide her, and think of her future. After Mrs. Fletcher died, Emma had taken on those responsibilities almost immediately. Their father, on the other hand, had turned all his attention to business.

For the first three years, he had worked tirelessly. He had taken all his meals out or at his club if he ate at all. He rarely saw his daughters before they retired for the night, and he never set foot in Mrs. Fletcher's sitting-room again. Mr. Fletcher found as many reasons as he could to travel often from Whitehaven under the guise of securing his family's financial independence.

Her father had succeeded in almost ruining his health. For the last

two years, he had struggled to keep his relentless business schedule. A succession of doctors had all prescribed him bedrest and lightened his attention to his duties, but he refused to listen.

The worry and the weight of her responsibilities made it hard for Emma to breathe. Suddenly, their small, shared bedroom felt too small. She opened the door silently and padded downstairs in her bare feet. If she could just slip into the back garden for a moment, Emma knew she would glimpse the stars and feel some modicum of comfort.

Despite the distance and the chance of clouds, even the faintest starlight still reminded her of her mother's words and helped ease the pain in her heart.

But it wasn't just the starlight that lifted Emma's spirits. The deep hours of the night were the only time she could be alone. Elizabeth's bright chatter, the housekeeper's questions about menus, the butler bringing visitors' cards, and the hundred myriad directions she needed to give the household staff kept her in company from the time she

opened her eyes until the time Elizabeth's breath finally settled into the rhythms of sleep. Emma moved fearlessly down the darkened stairs and felt the thrill of autonomy.

For one brief moment, she was her person, and it was only then that the world seemed to fill with possibilities. Every other hour was too busy for daydreams.

Emma was twenty years old now, and there were no expectations of her marrying. After her mother's death, she had missed her coming out and, instead, spent all her time raising her sister. The social circles of Whitehaven commended her choices, as she was a comfort to her father. She was also heir to his shipping channels and could, one day, learn about the family business with help from her father's chosen overseers. Only in the dark and lonely hours of the night could Emma even think of being an independent woman, and the daring notion made her heart race. She smiled dreamily as she reached the marbled foyer and turned down the hall toward the door to the back garden.

The housekeeper and maids were asleep in the attic, and the butler and footmen were in their rooms on the lower floor, but still, a light burned on the main floor of their townhome. Emma paused in the passageway and saw the candlelight came from her father's study.

The door was pulled almost closed, and Emma could have easily moved past unnoticed, but she knew it was that fear very which had gripped her mother in the end. Mrs. Fletcher wanted nothing more than for her family to hold fast together without her and always take care of each other. Emma couldn't leave her father awake in the night without feeling her mother's worry.

"Father?" she whispered at the door.

There was no answer, and Emma cautiously opened the door another inch. Once tidy and well-organized, her father's study now reminded her of the shifting dunes along the coast. Piles of papers drifted from one surface to another, some settling on the floor, and ledgers lay open with their spines broken. Near the door, propped against a clock that had not been wound in over a year, stood a stack

of unopened letters. Emma pushed the door open farther and glimpsed her father slumped over his work-strewn desk.

"Father?" There was a sharp note of worry in her voice.

The doctors had cautioned her in the gentlest terms possible that Mr. Fletcher's heart was failing. Even on his best days, her father's face had an ashen pallor, and he often leaned against the wall as he shuffled from room to room. He needed rest and the abatement of all his worries, but what if it was too late?

Emma tiptoed quickly across his study and was relieved to see the sheaf of papers under his head flutter as he breathed in and out. Her own heart had tripled its speed, and, for one moment, Emma pressed her hand again to her chest and tried to bring her fears back under control. Mr. Fletcher was still alive, though clearly not well. Emma tried to imagine what her mother would have done in such a situation.

Her father's study was at the back of the house, and directly below the Mister bedroom, he now avoided so assiduously. When she was

alive, Mrs. Fletcher had curtailed his late-night work by rapping on the floor to remind him when it was time for bed. A flash of inspiration loosened Emma's hard-fisted hand, and she removed it from her heart with a hopeful flutter.

In the morning, she would convince her father to rearrange the townhome finally. He could make his study both his bedroom and workplace, avoiding the strain the stairs put on his heart and encouraging him to get a decent night's sleep as often as possible. Emma knew he would resist, but he was bound to agree right away if she claimed Elizabeth wanted her room.

And, secretly, Emma imagined being able to open the casement in her room without disturbing anyone; she would be able to gaze at the stars, think of her mother, and dream of an independent future for herself.

Her revelation lifted the weight from her steps, and Emma quickly padded to the old divan, pulling a blanket from under the crooked stacks of books balanced there. She decided it would be worse to

shock her father awake, so, instead, she laid the blanket around his shoulders as gently as possible.

While she fussed with the loose folds, Emma's eyes accidentally strayed to the open ledger on the edge of his desk. Her father had taught her numbers early on, and her mother had done her practice every day. By the time she was twelve, she was in charge of the household ledger, so the tight columns of numbers made perfect sense. And what she saw stopped her breath: Mr. Fletcher's business was sunk into debt.

Eyes stinging, Emma looked away from what she knew she should not have seen and quickly slipped out of her father's study. She forgot all about going into the garden to glimpse the stars and rushed back upstairs to bury herself underneath the covers.

Her pillow was still wet with tears when Elizabeth woke her the following day.

"Oh, I do hope you are not catching a cold, dear Sister. I wanted us

to walk to the market today, but your eyes do look red!" Elizabeth paused to study her sister, but only for a moment before she turned to select a different scarf to wear.

Emma wanted to cancel their plans, but the day was sunny and bright, and it would be hard to justify doing so. "Don't fear, Elizabeth. The fresh air should do me all the good in the world."

"It will. Hurry now!" Elizabeth seized her favorite reticule, stuffed her handkerchief and a few hat pins inside, and dashed downstairs.

Emma tried to tell herself the walk would clear her head, but she could not help worrying about what amount of money there was to spend. She lingered over her wash basin and took her time dressing, all in the hopes that her father would be gone before she descended the stairs.

She was afraid he would see the worry in her face and know she had stolen into his study uninvited. How had he hidden such a terrible secret from them for so long?

Finally, knowing her sister was waiting anxiously, Emma gathered her strength and went downstairs. The housekeeper met her at the door to the dining room and informed her Mr. Fletcher had already gone out for the day. The older woman met her young mistress's eyes with a frown that said she had tried to persuade him otherwise for the sake of his health, but yet again, he had refused to listen.

"Thank you," Emma told her before she joined her sister at breakfast.

"It's such a lovely day; don't you think we should buy some fruit? Cook could make your favorite fruit jelly for tonight," Elizabeth suggested.

"Perhaps just simple fare for tonight is best," Emma said. The housekeeper again caught her eye, and Emma wondered how well-acquainted the sharp woman was with her family's dwindling fortunes. "We can indulge another day. Perhaps when Father can join us."

“Yes, Mistress.” The housekeeper nodded her assent, gave a shallow curtsy, and disappeared through the servants’ door and down to the kitchen to inform the cook.

Emma took a deep breath once the woman was out of earshot and tried to exhale all her worries. Elizabeth, still chattering on about the joys of the marketplace and shopping, did not notice her sister’s heavy sigh, and they finished breakfast quickly. Hopeful she would be able to breathe easier outside, once they were ready, Emma hurried her sister out of the door and down the street.

They had only gone a few yards when Elizabeth gave an exuberant cry. “Oh, Sister! There is Anna. Could we walk with her and her family?”

“Go ahead, Elizabeth, and walk with your friend. I want to take in the fresh air. We can meet up again at Market Place,” Emma told her.

Emma waved to Anna's family as Elizabeth joined them, then continued her slow pace, giving herself time to think. The worrying questions crowded her mind: Could Father save his shipping business? Was there any way he could supplement his income? Should they sell the townhome and move to a smaller holding?

Underneath all her worries and grief, Emma felt the same unexpected thrill she had felt when walking freely in the dark of the house the night before. Might there be something she could do to earn a living and help support her family?

It was almost an illicit idea, and her cheeks warmed at the thought, but there were no other immediate solutions she could think of. She was still deep in her daring thoughts when she met up with Elizabeth in the crowded market square.

"I'm glad to see some color back in your face," Elizabeth announced, though she had lost her bright smile.

"Whatsoever is the matter, dear?" Emma asked her sister.

Elizabeth's lips parted on a soft wail. "Anna is going to London this season, and I shall be left all alone! She's only going to be taking care of the younger ones and run errands for her older sisters, but she'll still be in town."

"Anna is not of age yet. And, with three elder sisters who have already celebrated their coming out, she'll most likely spend her season playing seamstress and maid," Emma pointed out, trying to comfort her sister.

"And governess to a pack of her own siblings," Elizabeth added with a thoughtful smile. Perhaps her friend wouldn't have such a grand time as she had first imagined.

Her excellent humor at once restored, Elizabeth moved on easily to shopping, but Emma remained distracted. Children ran unsupervised throughout the market square, and Emma realized how aptly her sister had likened them to wild dogs. Those on a shorter leash were always attached to a frazzled mother or trailed after by an exhausted servant.

The older siblings were always responsible for the younger ones and Emma found herself glad she and her sister came from a small family. While she had been forced to abandon some of her educational studies when she took charge of Elizabeth's upbringing, the loss had never been a trial for her. But she felt she would have enjoyed those studies now … if they didn't remind her so sharply of the loss of their mother.

That thought stayed with her throughout the busy day and, even though her father had made a rare appearance at the dinner table, it remained foremost in her mind. "Father, do you remember the name of my drawing teacher?"

"Mrs. Smith?" he guessed at random.

"Mrs. Smythe," Elizabeth corrected him. "She used to praise Emma all morning and berate me all afternoon. I've still not learned to sketch a decent landscape."

"Your talent always lay at the spinet," Emma reminded her.

“Your music teacher’s name was Bennett,” Mr. Fletcher remembered suddenly. “He told your mother repeatedly that you both had talent and should attend a music salon, but she did not want you to narrow your interests.”

“So, we added French and Italian to our studies instead,” Elizabeth said with a groan. “Oh, how terrible I was at tenses!”

Emma smiled. “You’re much better now; we’ve been reading French literature out loud in the afternoons.”

Mr. Fletcher gave his eldest daughter a small smile. “How good of you to continue to improve yourself, my dear.”

He stopped before he dared to say their mother would be proud of them, and a heavy silence settled over the table until the main course. When the footmen had cleared away the soup, and the butler had brought in the roast for Mr. Fletcher to carve, the subject of their accomplishments arose once again.

“You should see Emma’s needlepoint, Father,” said Elizabeth. “One small needle is all she needs to create a veritable garden of perfect flowers.”

Emma refrained from remembering how fond Mrs. Fletcher had been of embroidering butterflies and accepted the compliment with bowed head. She was accomplished at drawing, could play a decent air on the spinet, and was well-versed in two languages. She had also learned writing and arithmetic and had read every book in their father’s jumbled library. The combination of her experiences gave support to the budding idea she had carried around with her all day.

“Perhaps I should unearth the letters of recommendation our teachers left with us and put together a portfolio of my best work,” Emma mused aloud.

“Whatever for?” Elizabeth asked.

Emma took a deep breath and announced: “So that I can go to

London and become a governess."

Both daughters looked to Mr. Fletcher with bated breath. Elizabeth's face betrayed the fact that she feared she would be left behind, bereft and alone, never to make her debut or be anywhere near a fashionable ball. Emma was afraid he would see through her to the real reason behind her suggestion and forbid her to find employment and try earning an income.

He surprised them both by smiling. "What a truly inspired idea, my dear. I've long been considering writing to Cousin Matilda. She loved your mother dearly and always hoped you would stay with her whenever you finally go to London. I'm certain, between her good connections and your excellent letters of reference, you'll be accepted by the best agency and placed before the snow has fallen."

"But, Father, what about me?" Elizabeth burst out.

Mr. Fletcher looked at his youngest with a tired but indulgent smile. "You, my dear, will be a companion to your mother's cousin

until you come of age. With your sister there in London, I have no fear of you, and you will be well-taken care of."

With that fortuitous conversation, the matter was settled. Letters were dispatched, travel arrangements made, and, after two long weeks of hard traveling by coach, the Fletcher sisters arrived in London.

Chapter Two

Robert Duke of Dalwater leaned forward in his carriage seat and called up to his driver. “Why have we slowed?”

“Wagons ahead unloading, Your Grace,” came the prompt yet curt reply.

Robert cursed under his breath, then leaned out of the window. Unfortunately, there appeared to be no rude merchant holding up traffic, and there was no one at which to direct his ire. A flurry of footmen and servants were working to unload the wagons quickly and carry the heavy trunks into a fashionable townhome. Robert could do nothing but slump back on his seat and wait until his carriage had room to move forward.

“Imagining choosing such a time to move one’s household,” Robert muttered to himself. Then he stopped, thought about the date, and let out a long groan as he was alone. “Of course, the Season is starting.

It feels as if it comes earlier and earlier every year."

Eager to reach town before the cold rains made travel nearly impossible, families had been taking up residence in London sooner each autumn. Robert despised the chaos which the rising number of rental townhomes and the arrival of their new residents caused yearly, but, most of all, he hated the endless rounds of invitations, concerts, and balls they signified.

It always felt as if hunting season was on … and he was the fox as a bachelor. He would prefer to hide out all winter in his own Dalwater Manor and only venture into London proper to visit his gentleman's club. Unfortunately, his day's business could not be avoided any more than the traffic ahead.

After what seemed an age, his driver urged the horses forward, and they managed to ease through the chaotic scene. Robert made a note to select a different route on the way home and again hoped he would get away from the city sooner than expected. Once his business was concluded, he wished to get out into the surrounding countryside

quickly and be at home at Dalwater Manor as soon as possible.

His second wish was to accomplish his business without running into any acquaintances, but that hope was crushed as soon as he set foot out of his carriage. "Your Grace!" called a voice.

Robert looked about and recognized the acquaintance, though he could not recall the lord's name. "Good afternoon," he responded politely.

"How wonderful to see you here just in time for the Season. It's been too many years since you did our young ladies the great honor of attending a ball or two!" The older, jovial lord grinned at him.

"I'm here on urgent business, my lord. Good day to you."

The smiling lord would not be deterred. "Still worried about the gossipmongers, eh? Your Grace must know that all of London stands behind you. Women are fickle creatures, and you may have caught one of the worst of them. But, come now, there will be plenty of fresh

faces and angelic charms this year to enjoy, will there not? Won't you join my friends and I for dinner this evening?"

Robert ground his teeth. He did not like using his sister as an excuse, but he simply could not stomach the idea of getting caught up in another London Season. "Apologies, dear sir, but I am only here to conclude my duties to my sister."

The lord's face paled. "Yes, of course. Terrible tragedy. My thoughts and prayers are with you and your family."

"Thank you, sir." Robert touched the brim of his hat with finality, then took the stone steps of the office building in front of him two at a time.

"Well, there you are. About time," a sharp voice greeted him once inside.

Lady Susan, Dowager Duchess of Dalwater, rapped her cane on the floor. Though she did not need its support, his mother wielded the

gilded wood to express her every emotion. He recognized her claw-like grip on the carved head as a sign of impatience, but her other hand fluttered above the other, which worried him. They were not there on happy business, and the strain of it showed in the barely noticeable action. On top of that, she had been kept waiting, and that simply would not do.

"Mother, I'm sorry, I did not know you would be in attendance. Have they not settled you in the office with refreshments?" Robert looked around and saw a footman wearing a pained expression standing stiffly in the corner. Obviously, the offer had been made and refused, putting the young man in an awkward position.

"I told them my son would be here to escort me." The Dowager sniffed. She took Robert's offered arm and rapped her cane again. "Well? Tell them we are ready!"

The footman leaped from his post, and seconds later, the doors to an elegant but austere office were thrown open. A host of clerks stood ready to greet the Duke and Dowager Duchess, each looking as if he'd

swallowed an egg whole.

"Our man must be tied up in court," The Dowager told Robert.

The team of replacements all spoke at once, eager to assure the pair that the matter at hand could be dealt with immediately and efficiently by themselves. They were there to hear the final will and testimony of The Marquess and Marchioness of Allernach, Robert's recently departed sister and brother-in-law. He was ready to conclude the interview as quickly as possible, but his mother was sure to insist that the proper protocol be observed.

"Thank you, but we will wait," he told the clerks. He led his mother across the room and seated her on a stiff settee by the window.

The clerks, driven by the horror of somehow offending their superior clients, stumbled over each other with offers of refreshments, reading material, and other entertainments for what they were certain would be a short wait.

“Tea, thank you,” Robert said with a dismissive nod.

The order was given, and servants rushed in from another door to set out the tea service. The dowager took one look at the lot of them, waved them all away, and set about pouring the tea herself. Mother and son were left alone in the grand office to await their barrister’s attendance.

Robert stifled a sigh as he joined his mother, taking his tea the way she preferred him to drink it. “How have you fared these past six months, Mother?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Six months, and only a handful of visits from you. Six months since your dear sister passed, and we’ve all but become strangers!”

“And yet your weekly letters and instructions make me feel as if I haven’t missed a moment,” Robert said drily.

The Dowager’s stern countenance cracked a little, and she gave him

a fond glance as she handed him his tea. “You always were a trying child. Not at all like your niece and nephew. Please don’t mistake me. The children are a terrible burden to someone my age, but their good manners far exceed yours.”

Robert frowned into his tea cup. He had almost forgotten his sister’s children. Six months ago, their mother and father had died in a tragic carriage accident, and they had been living with the Dowager since that sad time. “Abigail, correct? And Hammond?”

“Henry.” She corrected him sharply.

Robert was saved further censure as the door again opened, and a stern man stepped inside. He was the late Marquess of Allernach’s barrister, and it was his duty to read them the last will and the witness's testimony. His tone was clipped and businesslike, but even the Dowager could not fault his impeccable manners. He commenced at once.

First, a laboriously detailed list of all the marquess’ properties, then

a litany of other holdings. Without a change in tone or tempo, the barrister checked off one heirloom at a time and which esteemed family member, friend, or acquaintance would receive the beloved object. He went through every item of the deceased couple's magnificent estate, right down to the last clutch of chicks to be born the week before the accident.

Almost lulled into a stupor by the man's monotonous voice, Robert started suddenly at the final clause. "Guardian? Me?"

"Your Grace has been appointed the legal guardian of both Miss Abigail and Mister Henry. They will remain your wards until the former is appropriately married, and the latter reaches his majority," the barrister repeated.

"Ah, your sister," the dowager said in a wistful voice. "She always knew just how to set you straight."

Robert scratched at his mutton-chop sideburns and tried not to think of his beloved sister. It still felt as if she were off touring the

countryside and would soon be there to laugh at all his little blunders over dinner. He could barely admit she was truly gone; how was he to deal with her heartbroken children?

"There must be some mistake. Allernach must have relatives who would love and care for the children much better than myself," Robert declared.

The barrister opened his mouth to speak, but the Dowager Duchess interrupted him with a sharp rap of her cane. "I'm afraid not, dear Robert. Otherwise, the children would not have been underfoot at my expense these last few months."

Knowing his mother had never been the nurturing kind, Robert could not hope the children would find a better home with their grandmother. The Dowager Duchess was loving and generous in her heart, but she firmly believed in the old adage that to spare the rod would spoil the child.

She also believed in the letter of the law and now stood up to show

she was content with the reading of the will and that their business was concluded.

Robert leapt to his feet a second too late and earned a stern look from his mother. “You are no longer to reside at the townhome and shall now escort me home to Dalwater Manor to greet the children,” she told him.

His heart sunk as he realized his dream of a peaceful, reclusive winter was gone. “Yes, Mother.”

Outside the offices, the dowager waved away Robert’s carriage. He gave her a hand into her own conveyance, where she could not even wait until he was seated across from her before she started in with her undisputable advice. “The children will need a firm hand. Their minds have not been on their studies whatsoever these past few months, and you must remedy that immediately.”

“They are still grieving their mother,” Robert pointed out against his best interests.

The dowager arched an eyebrow at him. "That is why you should marry as soon as possible. Give them the family they need, Robert, and stop your dithering."

Robert gave a short bark of laughter. "Of course, that is your solution. If the circumstances weren't so tragic, I might imagine that you and my sister have had this planned all along."

"She did not approve of you locking yourself away. This was to be your Season, she told me, and I intend to see her vindicated."

"And I'm sure you already have a list of appropriate matches for me." Robert wearily leaned his head back on the carriage seat and closed his eyes. "I merely hope you haven't encouraged any of their families because I am still not inclined to marry."

"Your inclination matters very little now that you have the children to think of."

With that the dowager sniffed and the conversation was closed. The carriage ride to Dalwater Manor, nestled deep in the countryside surrounding the great metropolis, did not take long. To Robert, it felt like an age. Just that morning, his plans had been simple and his preferred life of near-reclusiveness undisturbed. Now, he was trapped between his mother and his sister's offspring, and he rather fancied he'd rather be drawn and quartered.

Abigail, his sister's eldest child, appeared at the top of the grand staircase as soon as he and the dowager entered the Great Hall. She was seventeen years old, almost the exact copy of his sister, and Robert paused in shock. He realized in an instant how difficult it must have been for his mother to see his niece make such sudden appearances during their last six months of grieving. Obviously anxious to know her fate, the girl rushed down the stairs and caught herself just in time to give the dowager a deep curtsy.

"There, there, my dear. No need to fear you will be shipped off across the Atlantic. Your uncle here is now your legal guardian, and Dalwater Manor shall remain your home," the dowager said

reassuringly.

Robert thought it heartwarming how quickly his mother eased the girl's anxiety. He could see a close bond had already been formed between the two, and he wondered if it meant his niece would be his ally … or a spy for the dowager. Either way, he had no desire to come between them and would have preferred to be absent from the scene all together.

Instead, he gave Abigail a gentlemanly bow. "Welcome home, dear niece."

"And to you, Uncle Robert!" She surprised him with a quick embrace that exposed her still-childish sensibilities.

"Avast, ye pirates! What noise is this?" The door to the library swung open, and a slim boy wielding a wooden sword leapt into the hall. He stopped short when he saw the company gathered at the bottom of the staircase and, in his panic, tried to hide the toy weapon behind his back.

“Henry!” Abigail and the dowager cried as one.

Robert chuckled. “Never fear, my captain. It is none but your loyal crew.”

“Uncle Robert!” The ten-year-old boy flew across the Great Hall and gave Robert a collision more than a hug.

“Where on earth did you find that sword?” Robert asked.

Henry grinned. “I had one of the stablemen help me make it. Your estate has absolutely no amusements whatsoever.”

“I told you, Henry. You are too old for playthings, and you should be concentrating on your studies.” Abigail sounded remarkably stern and much like her grandmother.

Robert grinned. “Don’t worry, Henry. Your grandmother is already

converting me from bachelor to guardian, and I'm sure my estate will undergo the necessary changes to accommodate you. Besides, we can always begin your studies with Naval History."

"So, is it true? Are we to stay with you now?" Henry asked.

Abigail took hold of her over-eager brother and chastised him. "They've only just arrived. Don't bombard everyone with your questions."

The boy reluctantly followed his sister back to the library. "But who can I bombard then? Will you tell me what is going on?"

Robert watched his niece usher his nephew through the door, then turn and give him and his mother an apologetic curtsy. His heart clutched again as he saw her resemblance to his sister. It was a shame she was not here to guide her children, and Robert feared he would be a terrible replacement for their parents' love.

"I cannot believe you think this is what is best for them," he told his

mother.

The dowager rapped her cane to contradict him. “You are family, Robert. Besides, I’ve decided I shall remain at Dalwater Manor for the Season. I shall be here to assist you and see you and your new family settled quite comfortably.”

He longed to argue with her, but the dowager called for her lady’s maid and went upstairs to rest before dinner. She left him standing in the Great Hall, not knowing which way to turn. The arrangements for him to move from the London townhome back to the manor were already underway and would be done within two days.

Robert often moved back and forth at a moment’s notice, and both residences held everything he needed in between. In the end, he had no choice but to go to his rooms and dress for dinner.

Dinner was a painful affair, full of the dowager’s strict lessons on etiquette. Poor Henry squirmed, spilled his soup course, and knocked half a jelly off his plate and onto the floor. Abigail tried

unsuccessfully to speak with the dowager about plans for the Season and was instead corrected on everything from her posture to the way she put her fork in her mouth.

Even Robert was upbraided, first for his selection of cheese and then for his consumption of wine. By the seventh course, everyone was exhausted, and the children elected to go straight to their rooms.

"And where exactly do you think you are going?" The dowager asked Robert.

"Proper manners require that I now take a brandy," Robert said.

The dowager frowned, certain he was not answering her question, though she had no choice but to let him disappear. "Good night, then," she sniffed.

As soon as the door closed between them, Robert knocked back his brandy and summoned his carriage. He was back in the center of London within the hour and finally breathed a sigh of relief when he alighted on the steps of his club, Bradsby's.

But even the sanctuary usually offered by Bradsby's was limited because of the Season drawing ever nearer. Robert gritted his teeth and moved through the crowded rooms until he caught sight of the Duke of Elsby. "Theo! Thank God. What a day I've had. You have no idea."

Theo grinned and gestured for a waiter to follow with their drinks. He steered his friend to a more private corner, where the two young dukes sat in comfortably stuffed leather chairs. "Turns out I may know more than you think," Theo told him once they were settled.

Robert groaned. "Is there to be no more privacy anywhere?"

"Not in any corner of London that gossip can reach," Theo said. "So, you've acquired yourself a fine pair of children, eh?"

Robert paused and sipped at his drink thoughtfully. "They are a fine pair. Wonderful, actually. Though the girl looks too much like my sister."

“Bit like seeing a ghost about the manor?” Theo gave his friend a sympathetic look. He had grown up in the same circles as Robert and his sister, and he had been as fond of the marchioness as he was his siblings.

“Exactly,” Robert said.

“Well, there are cures for children, you know. Pack them off to the countryside; send the girl to finishing school and the boy into the Navy, or you could just hire a governess and go on as if nothing has changed.”

“The Dowager has declared she’ll be staying at Dalwater throughout the Season.”

Theo’s hearty laugh drew a few glances from the other gentlemen in the room. “Ah, well then, everything will be taken care of without you having to say a word.”

“She claims the children need a mother and that, accordingly, I must marry posthaste.” Robert ground his teeth as Theo laughed again. “Though, perhaps you’re right. If I hire a governess, there would be no need for my life to change.”

Robert leaned back in his club chair and felt his shoulders relax for the first time all day. Perhaps, just perhaps, there was a way he could fulfill his duties to the children without raising his mother’s ire and without hanging the marriage noose around his own neck. He toasted Theo for his wise advice, now assured his future need not change as much as he had originally feared.

Chapter Three

Cousin Matilda was a plump and energetic woman of three and forty years. Despite her age, she bounced up from the breakfast table at every possible opportunity and kept her conversation going as she bustled to the window or remembered another jar of preserves the butler should add to the sideboard. Emma strained to follow the thread of their talk as their hostess moved about faster than a darting dragonfly. Elizabeth gave up trying and, taking up the excuse of the younger sister, simply concentrated on her meal.

"Lovely parish folks down the lane gave us a delightful marmalade. . ." Matilda's voice faded as she disappeared down the hall to tell the beleaguered butler. ". . . and that's why the vicar insists on catching his fish!"

"Will we have the honor of meeting Mr. Hughes today?" Emma asked.

“Oh, yes, my dear. He’s around here somewhere,” said her aunt, reappearing.

Emma reached out a hand to stop her aunt from popping up again. “This is such a pleasant room.”

Matilda beamed and energetically pointed out all the small improvements she had made to the vicarage’s narrow dining hall. Luckily, she could do so from her chair, and the respite gave Emma a moment to sip her tea.

From the outside, the vicarage appeared to be a modest, square domicile, with three square windows ranged across the second story, an arched doorway, and a truncated front garden. Once inside, the living quarters kept surprising: the hall ran from the front door all the way to the back garden, with a graceful staircase hardly blocking the view. To the right was the narrow dining hall in which they now sat, at a table meant for eight. The fire at Emma’s back crackled merrily, and sunlight washed in the front windows over a collection of

comfortable chairs.

A generously laden sideboard stood immediately inside the door, close to where Elizabeth minded her breakfast peacefully. The far end of the room overlooked the back garden and had enough room for a second serving table, a large cabinet, and the door leading to the kitchen.

The main floor also held a sunny parlor, a modest ballroom, and the vicar's study. Upstairs there were four large bedrooms, a sitting room, and a music room. To the girls' delight, they were placed in a room at the back of the house which overlooked the gardens. Below them, the wide portico gave way to manicured topiaries and neat knot gardens. Farther back, the garden became wilder, marked by large shade trees, and in the back of the lot was a large, walled-in potager's garden.

"Ah, here we are!" Matilda jumped again from her seat. "Come, Mr. Hughes, our guests are hoping for a glimpse of you."

Patrick Hughes, the Vicar of Brixton, entered the dining room with a

gallant sweep of his hat. “Welcome! I trust your travels were not too much of a hardship.”

“Dear, may I present Miss Emma Fletcher and her sister, Elizabeth.”

“No need to rise, my dears. We are so happy to host you. But I hear, Miss Emma, that you are truly industrious and plan to leave us posthaste.”

Cousin Matilda jumped in as suddenly as she moved: “I have told Mr. Hughes about your plan to find a governess position, and it was he who suggested Mr. Easton at the agency.”

“Thank you for your help, Mr. Hughes,” Emma said.

“Such lovely manners,” the vicar remarked. “She will make the proudest of houses a fine governess, I’m certain.”

He joined them for a cup of tea but could not keep his wife still

either. By the time Emma and Elizabeth were done with breakfast and due to go about their errands for the day, both felt exhausted.

"It would take eighteen children to equal the energy of Cousin Matilda," Elizabeth whispered as they walked through the front gate and down the street.

"She is so kind," Emma said. "I'm relieved to know you will be comfortable with them after I receive a position."

"Oh, you plan to leave me too soon," Elizabeth cried.

Emma did not wish to explain to her sister why finding a job was so important, so she changed the subject to their morning's adventure. "There's the inn. The stagecoach should arrive soon."

The stagecoach did arrive moments later, pulled by four prancing black horses with plumes on their bridles. Three passengers disembarked, looking dusty from their long ride in from the South. Emma and Elizabeth took their seats in the tightly packed coach, and

soon the contraption started off, heading towards the River Thames. Six other passengers swayed on the seats around them, and the conversation was curt in the stuffy compartment. They stopped at two more inns, where passengers climbed out, and collected packages tossed down from the roof rack. Soon, though, they rattled across the bridge and pulled to a stop in front of a busy pub named The Nag and Nails.

"There's the Apple Market," Emma pointed out as the dusty stagecoach clattered away from them. "Do you have the list from Cousin Matilda?"

Elizabeth searched her reticule, then her waistband, and then her sleeves. "I must have left it behind. Oh, Emma, don't be cross! She leapt up to change it so many times, and she must have taken it back to the cook at least thrice, I simply lost track."

Emma reassured her sister that she remembered at least half of the list. Luckily, Cousin Matilda seemed an understanding and generous woman; they were lucky to have their mother's relative to stay with.

Emma focused on negotiating the crowded market safely.

The Apple Market occupied two stories and was ranged between a series of arched doorways along the main floor, with more stalls than they could count. Clusters of shoppers dodged across the thoroughfare until it was impossible to tell which way the flow of traffic went. The sisters have jostled along, seeing heaped buckets of fresh flowers, stacks of hearty breads, and produce of every kind.

"Oh, look, Emma! A whole stall of honey!"

Emma smiled but felt even more fatigue as her sister rushed ahead of her. London was a bustle, their hostess a ball of energy, and now the market a flood of sights and sounds. She tried not to long for the relative quiet of Whitehaven, not when her sister was having such fun. Still, Emma trailed a little behind.

All her hopes rested on her interview with Mr. Easton at the employment agency. Without a lucrative position, Emma would never be able to send money home to her father or ensure her sister was

kept in the proper fashion. She would return to Whitehaven a failure, having spent more on the trip to London than she was worth. She simply had to find a governess position, and that thought made it hard to concentrate on Elizabeth's sightseeing.

Just then, she was stopped by a dingy-looking woman with a basket of wilted flowers on her arm. She held out a limp bouquet to Emma and asked for a pittance. It broke Emma's heart to turn the woman away, but she needed every coin she had for her and her sister.

"Elizabeth?"

Her sister had slipped ahead into the crowd and, suddenly, Emma could not see her. She rushed forward but was slowed by the long lines in front of a cheese stall. Children darted across her path, and Emma knew there was no reason to worry about Elizabeth's safety, but other, worse, ideas occurred to her. If she couldn't keep track of a fifteen-year-old, how would she fare with her assigned charges?

What if she failed and was sent from her position in disgrace?

Her heart began to beat frantically as she scanned the busy market. Elizabeth would not go anywhere near the pungent fishmonger, and she was not likely to look at the tinker's wares.

She was not in front of the enormous pile of exotic pineapples stacked outside a fruit seller's stall. Emma shoved her way through the throngs, heading to the place her sister would most likely have gone: the milliner's.

"There you are!" Emma could barely catch her breath as she grabbed tight to her sister's gloved hand.

Elizabeth smiled, unaware of Emma's anxiety, and told her brightly: "I remembered that Cousin Matilda told us to buy apples for a pie."

Forcing her wild heartbeat to slow, Emma looked around and spotted the nearest fruit stall. Off to one side, there was an overflowing cart of shiny apples. They were the reddest apples she had ever seen, and Emma allowed herself a long moment to pick out

the best.

Once she'd filled a paper bag with more than a dozen of the gleaming fruits, she braced herself to hear the cost. Even though their father had given both girls a generous allowance for their trip, Emma felt the need to make every shilling count. She couldn't dream of wasting money, not now she had an inkling of her father's failing business.

"Can we go that way? Someone said there's a whole stall of songbirds over there," Elizabeth pointed far across the bustling market. "Isn't Covent Garden a marvel?"

"One we'll return to many times and enjoy, even more, I hope," Emma told her. "Now, I really must find us a hack, so I shall arrive at my appointment with Mr. Easton on time."

Elizabeth's mouth puckered, and she was on the edge of resisting when she finally noticed her sister's pale face. "Are you worried about your interview? But you're quite brilliant, Sister! I'm sure he

already has the perfect position for you. Perhaps you'll end up working in a palace?"

Emma gave an unladylike snort at her sister's outrageous optimism. "Perhaps I'll end up selling flowers from a basket."

She pulled her younger sister back through the still-thick crowds and backed out onto the street in front of the pub. There, Emma spotted a hackney across the way.

The sisters scurried into traffic and hailed the driver as they ran. They would have made it easily if Emma hadn't somehow run into a brick wall before she reached the pavement.

Elizabeth froze in horror, her hands clamped over her mouth, as Emma tumbled backwards into the street. Their bright, red apples flew everywhere and landed hard as rocks on top of Emma. She lifted her arms to block her face just in time and cringed as she wondered what filth she had landed in.

Surprisingly, all Emma could smell was light, masculine cologne. A heady mix of bergamot, leather, and some delicious spice she could not identify. Emma pulled back her arms and glanced up curiously, only to see a tall gentleman leaning down to offer her a hand.

"Forgive me, miss! Are you hurt?"

Mortified to be seen sprawled in the dust and grime of the road, Emma's cheeks blushed crimson. She could see her ridiculous image in the spotless shine of the gentleman's boots. Instead of reaching for his offered hand, Emma quickly reached to tug her hem down and straighten her bonnet.

"My apples," she lamented.

The gentleman laughed, drawing her glance to his brown eyes. Gold flecks ringed their pupils, adding to the shine of his humor. "Ladies first, apples second, miss. Please, otherwise, my mother will think I have learned no manners whatsoever."

Emma could not turn down his second offer of help, and his strong hand levered her upright. She felt dizzy from the ease of his strength, and he had to steady her with his other hand. Elizabeth gasped behind her hands at the intimate touch, bringing another wave of heat to Emma's cheeks.

The gentleman was tall, and her nose reached only to his chin. From there, she could see the fine cut of his coat, the expensive gleam of his bright buttons, and the crisp whiteness of his cravat. The smell of his cologne was stronger now, and she swayed as the scent affected her senses in a giddy way.

"I'm sorry, sir. I must not have been looking." Emma muttered, red-faced.

He reached up a gloved hand, placed one finger on her chin, and tipped her face up so he could see her eyes and inspect her. He asked again: "Are you hurt?"

"No, sir."

Elizabeth gave a muffled squeak and broke their mutual stares. “Oh, Emma!”

“I’m perfectly fine, dear. Really.” Emma stepped back from those fascinating eyes and smoothed down her dress.

The gentleman took the time to offer a gallant bow. “Please permit me to escort you on your way.”

“No, thank you. We must be off,” Emma said. She glanced down into the road to stop herself from staring.

“At least permit me to buy you another dozen apples.”

“No, sir. It was my fault for running into you.” Emma gave a short curtsy and tried to turn around, but the gentleman moved to keep in front of her.

“The fault was entirely mine. I was running down the road, and you couldn’t have possibly seen me before it was too late. It is *I* who should apologize further.”

“Running down the road?” Elizabeth repeated questioningly.

The gentleman finally noticed Elizabeth hovering behind him and made room for her to join her sister. “Yes. I was foolishly chasing the pick-purse who made off with my mother’s reticule.”

“Foolish? That sounds like a most gallant action. I am so sorry. I impeded you in your pursuit.” Emma gave him a sorrowful look.

The gentleman shrugged. “They know these streets and crowds as salmon know the stream. Most likely, I would have lost the foot race in the end.”

“Still, we shouldn’t keep you from your mother,” Emma said.

Again, he stepped in front of her. “My mother is safe in her carriage under the care of her servants.”

Emma glanced in the direction where he nodded and saw a most magnificent carriage and pair. Two horses, pure white as summer clouds, tossed their proud heads in the traces. She spied a gold-gilded family crest adorning their bridles as well as the carriage itself.

“Please, extend my apologies to your mother, sir.”

“And from whom shall I say the apology comes?” He tipped his head to the side and smiled.

Her heart thumped, and Emma pressed a hand to it. The shock was rather too much for her, and she longed to hide away until the embarrassment had passed. “From the foolish girl with the apples.”

“You *are* hurt!” The gentleman sounded indignant as he noted her shaking hand pressed to her chest. “Please, miss, you must allow me to help.”

“Help?” Elizabeth’s voice was barely more than a peep. Her eyes were the size of saucers as she looked up at the handsome man.

“Come, I shall escort you to my physician immediately.”

“No, thank you,” Emma said, dropping her hand. “We really must be going.”

“Then, at least give me your name. I will have my man call at your residence. It really was a nasty fall, miss, and I won’t be content until I know you are alright.”

Emma stretched out both arms and shifted the balance from one foot to another, exaggerating the movement to prove she was whole. “The harm is only to my pride, sir. Now, truly, my sister and I have an appointment we must keep.”

He could not ask again, or he would breech all decorum. The

gentleman knew it and bit his lip as if to stop himself. Finally, he stepped back and bowed, allowing the sisters to pass. "Good day then, miss. I wish you well."

"Thank you. And you." Emma gave him what she hoped was a dignified nod.

"The hackney is gone," Elizabeth whispered.

Without interrupting them again or asking permission, the gentleman stepped to the curb and waved a gloved hand. Only seconds passed before an available carriage arrived at his side. He opened the carriage door for the ladies. Once they were seated comfortably inside, he doffed his hat and gave Emma one last bow.

She made it ten yards before she turned around to look at the handsome gentleman one last time. He was still rooted to the spot where they had left him, and a smile flashed across his face as he saw her eyes seek him out. Emma did not allow herself to smile back, but she did note his ash-blond hair and the way the sun lit its thick

tresses.

"He is quite the most handsome man," Elizabeth said. She was staring at her sister instead of the man with her lips quirked in a teasing smile.

Emma turned back and gave her sister a reproving glance. "I was lamenting the apples. Now we have nothing to bring Cousin Matilda, and I've wasted the shillings."

Elizabeth snorted. "What you wasted was the perfect opportunity to make that gentleman's acquaintance. Oh, Emma! What did it feel like to have your hand in his?"

"No more of that," Emma snapped. "Now, we must hope I arrive at my interview in time. That is all we should think about."

She fretted about the lateness of the hour and the scattered apples while the hired carriage careened through the busy streets of London. The thought of the wasted money had brought her worries back into

sharp focus, but Emma soon found the image of the man's golden-flecked brown eyes dispelling the visions of sums and totals.

Chapter Four

The hired hack clattered onto the crowded street where the agency was located. The traffic was less heavy there, but it still took some minutes for the carriage to find an opening at the curbside to drop Emma.

She knew they could not afford to retain the carriage while she went inside for her interview, but Elizabeth did not know the reason why not. She hopped out, eager to enjoy the rare London sunshine and the interesting sights all around.

Elizabeth held on to her sister's arm and clucked like a mother hen. "It won't do for you to go inside looking all disheveled. I declare you were too distracted during our ride even to fix your bonnet!"

Emma tapped her foot nervously as Elizabeth smoothed her auburn hair and twirled curls of it around her fingers to frame Emma's pale

face. She then impatiently fixed her bonnet and jammed the hairpins back in place. Once that small service to her appearance was done, Emma squeezed her sister's fingertips.

"I'm hopeful the outcome of this meeting will help to secure our future," she admitted to Elizabeth. "I hope I'm on time!"

"Father sent your letters of recommendations and your portfolio ahead of you. I can't imagine Mr. Easton could look at your landscapes of Whitehaven and not find you a suitable position. Don't be nervous, Emma. You've got such talent; I just wonder why you are so determined to waste it as a governess."

"My sketches won't make us any money," Emma muttered. She then sought to distract her sister before Elizabeth began to wonder about her preoccupation with finances. "I won't be long, but you should feel free to walk up and down the block. The vicar assured me this is a safe part of town."

Elizabeth's teasing smile returned. "Still, it would be safer had we

made the acquaintance of that handsome gentleman. I can't understand why you didn't even give him your name! He seemed so genuinely interested in knowing you."

"By the seal on his carriage and the shine on his boots, that gentleman was clearly a member of the peerage far above our station," Emma chided her sister. "We must remember our place in life so that we don't walk about with our heads in the clouds."

"I'm certain he would have wished you luck along with me," Elizabeth said. She kissed Emma's cheek and waved her up the steps to the austere-looking office building.

Emma took one last glance at her sister, smiling in the sunshine, and pulled open the heavy doors. Once inside, her heart sunk: the large clock on the wall said she was five minutes late. Trying hard not to appear as flustered as she felt, Emma went to the desk to announce her arrival.

"Miss Emma Fletcher. I have an appointment with Mr. Easton."

The clerk looked up and crooked an eyebrow at the clock. "*Had* an appointment. I will have to check and see if Mr. Easton is still available."

Emma clutched her reticule and stood against the wall the clerk indicated. The office was smaller than she had expected, and there was a busy flow of people stomping back and forth through the confined lobby. The employment office placed everyone from laundresses to stone masons, ladies' maids to grooms, and the crowd would have fascinated Emma … if she hadn't been so terrified. What if she had lost her chance already by being late? She doubted she could expect to get her reference letters and portfolio returned, and she would have to start all over.

"Miss Fletcher? Mr. Easton will be able to see you in just a few moments." The clerk then groaned aloud as a woman rushed through the doors and headed straight to his desk.

"Please, sir. I need another chance!" The woman cried without

caring who saw or heard.

Emma averted her eyes, but the conversation was unavoidable in the small lobby.

“You’ve been told already, Mrs. Atmond, that any absence would result in the termination of your position.”

“But my mother was ill! She had no one else to attend her!”

“Your absence caused your employers no end of distress, and they have already secured a new maid from our service. Because of your infraction, your name is at the bottom of the list. All you can do is wait.” The clerk pursed his lips, looking as though he need say no more.

“It was only two days, and the other maids covered my duties, sir. Please! This position feeds my family.” The woman looked as if she was ready to kneel before the desk and beg.

The clerk waved his hand, and two other agency employees came forward to guide the weeping woman back outside. Emma prayed her sister was gone from the steps and did not see the distressing scene. She then dug out a handkerchief and twisted it nervously in her hands. The rules were strict when so many people sought the same employment, and she worried her chances were already ruined by arriving late.

"Miss Fletcher?"

Mr. Easton waved her impatiently into his office. He was a stern-looking man, with deep lines next to his mouth that indicated he did a slight frown. Without a word, he shut the door behind Emma and pointed to a hard chair with a quick flick of his hand. She sat ramrod straight, her heart hammering, and it took all her strength to stop twisting the handkerchief and fold her hands politely.

"Why was your family unable to find you a decent connection, Miss Fletcher? It seems your father's respectable position in Whitehaven

would easily allow your introduction to the well-off families in your neighborhood." Mr. Easton sat and stared at her with gray, unblinking eyes.

Emma swallowed hard. "There was a family illness that prevented it. I was never introduced to society."

"Shame," Mr. Easton said. His eyes flicked over her figure and then glanced towards the door. "You were late, Miss Fletcher, so I am not sure you are serious about finding gainful employment."

"I apologize, Mr. Easton. My sister and I are not used to your wonderful city."

He waved away her excuse. "With all your father's business connections, I am certain a place could be found for you among the families of Whitehaven."

"I'm afraid my father is also in poor health, Mr. Easton."

“His health was not too poor to write to me.”

Emma bit her tongue. She needed Mr. Easton’s help, but he seemed determined to put her off. His colorless demeanor told her he was not willing to overextend himself and was already overworked as it was.

She had to speak carefully in the hopes of appealing to him without bothering him. It was hard for Emma to keep the panic out of her voice, but she took a deep breath and spoke gently.

“My father was uncertain how to proceed, and he had heard such wonderful things about your agency. Governess positions are not easy to find, and he wanted to make sure we went through the proper channels and made the best match. Hence his hiring you.”

“You are not listening to my advice, Miss Fletcher.” Mr. Easton scowled and shuffled large stacks of paper on his desk. You say that you and your father are reliant on my expertise, yet you arrived for this interview five minutes late and have already rejected my initial

suggestions."

"I apologize, sir." Emma took another deep breath. "I only wish my family had made such connections as you suggest. Please consider that I am willing to move from Whitehaven and accept a good placement wherever it may be found."

Mr. Easton's scowl stayed in place, but he found her letters and portfolio and flipped through them quickly. "You play harpsichord?"

"Yes, sir. I also assisted my younger sister in her practice. She has the talent, but I learned many good teaching techniques while helping her."

"Do you read Latin, Miss Fletcher?"

Emma nodded. "Yes, sir. I also speak and read both French and Italian."

“That is quite an education.”

“My mother was insistent,” Emma said. She managed to keep the catch out of her voice which always occurred when speaking of her deceased mother.

“And your drawing teacher seemed quite enamored with your sketches. Can he not be contacted and consulted in finding a suitable position?” Mr. Easton asked.

“It has been many years since we had his acquaintance, sir.”

“In the future, Miss Easton, I suggest you keep up with your connections so that others must not have to step in for you,” Mr. Easton snapped.

“Yes, sir. Thank you for the advice. I will make sure to follow it.”

He gave Emma a sharp glance, decided she was sincere, but still

scowled. “I am a very busy man, Miss Fletcher. Donald!”

The clerk Emma had seen in the lobby came flying over and threw open the office door. “Yes, Mr. Easton, sir?”

“Bring me the latest list of openings, please.”

The clerk glanced at Emma briefly, then disappeared to do his boss’s bidding. While they waited, Mr. Easton steepled his fingers and said nothing. Emma kept her eyes on her open portfolio and prayed that a position was available for her.

After the expense of traveling, not to mention the cost of new traveling costumes and the latest fashions, she could not return to her father empty-handed. They would be worse off than ever then, and Emma could not bear the thought of adding to her father’s debt.

“Here, sir.” Donald returned at a run and handed Mr. Easton a list. Then he turned back to the lobby and shut the door behind him.

Mr. Easton considered the list, and his scowl deepened. “It is as I have foreseen. The lady, who arrived before you, was on time for her appointment. She has accepted the last available governess position.”

Tears sprung to Emma’s eyes. “Surely there must be something!”

Mr. Easton’s cold, gray eyes glared at Emma. “Your letters of reference indicated you are decent with a needle. There is a position as a seamstress for one of our London factories.”

Emma could not speak; the position was far below her hopes and much lower than she could accept without disgracing her family’s good name.

“No?” Mr. Easton’s lips thinned as he perused the list. “We do not have any openings for a drawing teacher, and most families prefer a gentleman’s instruction in the arts.”

Emma knew there was no hope of landing a position drawing caricatures for the local papers or even sketching products for adverts. It was not fit to work for a woman, though Emma knew it mattered little to the finished artwork whether the hand was female.

"New Bethlehem Hospital is always in need of nurses. Your references say nothing about your nursing abilities, but I believe they are willing to hire and let you learn on the job," Mr. Easton said.

Her breath caught in her throat. Empty bed pans and mop up blood? The idea was enough to make her feel faint. "I'm sorry, Mr. Easton, but I believe that is a job one must feel a calling for in order to do the greatest good."

"So, you have no call to help your fellow man?"

"I fear I may faint at the sight of blood." Emma lied, but she could not bear the idea of working in the fearsome hospital.

"Well, Miss Fletcher, your connections are not good enough to

recommend you as a lady's maid. You would have to start off assisting a housekeeper and working downstairs before you learned the necessary duties."

Emma's shoulders began to slump, and she fought to keep her head up. "Mr. Easton, please advise me. Will another governess position come available?"

"Yes, but I cannot be certain of the time. You must be willing to remain in London and have patience." He dropped the list to his desk and met her wide eyes. "Is that possible?"

She nodded and pressed her handkerchief to her trembling lips.

"You must consider all your options, Miss Fletcher, and I am dismayed that you have overlooked the most obvious of choices."

Emma raised her eyes to meet his stare but did not understand. "What choice, Mr. Easton?"

He sniffed, and a trace of what could have been construed as amusement passed over his stern face. “Why, marriage, of course. Miss Easton. You do not have to let a family illness and your lack of introduction keep you from the station of holy matrimony.”

“You are the first to suggest it, Mr. Easton,” Emma confessed.

His eyebrows raised. “Surely that is not possible. Miss Fletcher, you are an attractive woman with a decent family name.”

She lowered her eyes and bit her lip demurely.

Mr. Easton waved away her modesty and continued by gesturing to her open portfolio. “You are clearly accomplished and of the right age. Why not go home to Whitehaven and find yourself a suitable match?”

Emma again began to tear up at the idea of returning home empty-

handed. How could she return to her father after the great expense of traveling to London and ask him to provide her with a dowry? On top of that, Emma's stomach knotted at the idea of being sold into marriage. There was no assurance she would make a match that would assist Elizabeth or even see her father comfortably into his old age. No, working was the only choice she had.

"Miss Fletcher, please. I insist you follow my advice. Marriage is the best option."

She dared to shake her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Easton, but there are too many impediments. I am willing to work. Is there nothing else on your list?"

He scowled again. "Impediments? Such female nonsense. If there is no existing connection in your hometown, then you must apply yourself to London society."

Emma fought back the tears and could not trust herself to speak.

Mr. Easton took her silence as compliance and dug through his desk drawers. “I do know a woman who can help young women in your position. She has a long record of successful matches and would be happy to take you on for a nominal fee. The fee, of course, will be returned to you if your husband is satisfied with the union.”

Emma accepted the card with a shaking hand. “Thank you, Mr. Easton.”

He clapped his hands together and stood up, going to his office door and opening it for her. “Good luck to you, Miss Fletcher.”

“Please, sir, could you not keep me in consideration for a governess position?”

Mr. Easton heaved a sigh. “Yes, Miss Fletcher. I will keep you informed if a position comes about. But, please, consider my good advice.”

“Thank you, sir.” Emma was shuffled into the lobby and the office

door shut behind her.

The clerk looked up from his desk and seemed unsurprised to see her tears. Another two women stood against the wall where Emma had waited. One anxiously adjusted the drooping feather in her bonnet while the other stared straight ahead with tired, vacant eyes. Emma could tell, despite her tears, that she was better off than them, and she did her best to stop her sniveling. She had to find her strength again and have faith.

Still, Emma could not stand the idea of facing her sister with red eyes. She stopped in the corner near the front doors and dabbed at her cheeks. Surely a governess position would open up soon! Or she would have to return and take her wages as a nurse or seamstress. To pay a matchmaker's fee on top of her traveling expenses was beyond what Emma could endure and her father could afford. She had to find employment and not depend on marriage to save her and her family.

Emma took one more deep breath and then pulled open the front doors. Elizabeth was again standing at the bottom of the steps and

smiling in the sunshine. She walked slowly down to join her sister and prayed Elizabeth would not see the upset in her eyes.

Her younger sister noticed in an instant. “Oh, Emma! Whatever is the matter?”

“Nothing, dearest. There are just not any open governess positions at the moment. I must be patient.”

Elizabeth frowned. “You’ve never been impatient before, so why do you look so sad?”

For a reckless moment, Emma wished to confess everything to her sister: their father’s failing business, the building debts, and the worry that his health was rapidly declining. Then, she looked at Elizabeth’s bright eyes and steadied herself.

“There were no decent positions, and I find myself eager for the independence of earning a wage. That is all, dearest.”

“Perhaps you are still shaken up from your tumble earlier,” Elizabeth suggested. She rushed forward to flag down a hackney carriage.

“I’m fine, dear. No need to worry.”

“Then, cheer up. Look what I found!” Elizabeth picked up a parcel of apples that she had set on the stone steps. “There was a cart at the end of the street and I was able to replace the ones that scattered all over the road.”

Emma’s smile wavered at the thought of more money spent, but she loved her sister for the gesture. “I’m so glad we won’t return to Cousin Matilda empty-handed.”

“I still wish you had let that gentleman buy the replacements,” Elizabeth said, determined to tease her sister out of her sadness.

Emma's smile stiffened at the mention of the fine gentleman. If she hadn't run into him, she would have gotten the governess position! The thought plagued her throughout the whole carriage ride back to the vicarage, despite the memory of his warm eyes.

Upon their arrival, even the vicar was able to see Emma was inconsolable. He took her hands and told her firmly: "Have faith, Miss Emma. The Lord will open the right door for you. Have faith, and all will be well."

Emma thanked him for his kind words and endeavored to be both faithful and patient.

Chapter Five

After the mysterious young miss left with her sister, Robert returned to his carriage. He wished to sit back and enjoy the ride back to Dalwater Manor, but his mother desired conversation. Unfortunately, the dowager's idea of a suitable topic was the number of successful marriages amongst his peers.

"The Earl of Batford was married in the early spring, and his brother in late summer," she informed Robert.

He ignored her pointed look but nodded politely. "Yes, Mother. How felicitous for them both."

"They both met their brides during the first month of the season," the dowager said.

"I've never considered winter to be a romantic season," Robert said.

“All the rain and cold. Seems an unwise time to dash about town going to parties.”

For the past few years, Robert had avoided the London Season all together by hiding out at his country estate. True, there was no hunting at that time of year and very little to do, but he enjoyed the peace and quiet. Both his country estate and Dalwater Manor had superb libraries, and he often spent the winter months in the study. Last winter, he had endeavored to learn all he could about irrigation, and his tenants’ fields had flourished over the dry summer.

“Enough of your hiding out.” The dowager rapped her cane on the floor of the carriage.

Robert assured the coachman they did not actually require anything and then turned to his mother. “You yourself have spoken against the idle time of the Season.”

The dowager narrowed her eyes at her son. “I am an old woman and have no need of balls and concerts. It is for the youth, the

marriageable, and that is exactly what you are."

"I'm not so young, and I am no longer foolish." Robert wished his mother would take the hint and let the conversation end there.

"You mustn't dwell on the past, Robert. No one blames you for first doomed match. Now is the time to think of your future."

Robert ground his teeth and turned his attention back out of the carriage window. "There is nothing wrong with a man in my position choosing a solitary future. We know many happy bachelors who have bettered themselves and England by remaining unattached and focusing on their work."

As Robert had hoped, the dowager launched into a lecture about peerage and their new obsession with employment. It seemed all manner of dukes, earls, and lords of all sorts were seeking to excel in work. Some had taken to farming improvements, some to scientific pursuits, and some invested in strange and precarious inventions for the future. She disapproved of such silliness and thought a

gentleman's job should always be attending to his land, his family, and his name.

She began a litany of those who had failed or made fools of themselves, and Robert's thoughts were finally able to drift. He liked the idea of work, but it would mean coming into London more often and he had barely been able to stand Covent Garden that day.

Until the incident.

Robert could still feel where the young woman's body had bounced off his chest. She had been so slight, like a feather, and had tumbled backward too quickly for him to catch her. What if he had seen her?

The apples may have still gone flying, and he could have scooped them up for her, though he thought she probably would have run off if he had done so, so demure had she been in his presence. As it was, he could still see her clearly in his mind, sprawled on the hard-packed dirt of the road, and he berated himself again for causing her any pain.

Then, he remembered what it had been like to lift her up from the ground. She had been so light, and he had exerted himself too much in the effort and thrown her off balance. That had allowed him to take her in his arms. He couldn't very well have let her fall again, could he? Robert's hand curved as he recalled exactly how her waist had fit so perfectly into his hand.

The young miss had been pleasingly modest, all rosy cheeks and downcast eyes. Those eyes! Robert called them up in his memory again and again, bright and clear and emerald green. Eyes worth more than the jewels they put to shame. If only she hadn't been so anxious to escape him, so conscious of the impropriety of their meeting, he could have gazed into those depthless pools all afternoon. As it was, though, she had left without giving him anything more than a second glance. He didn't even know her name, and he was certain she would be lost to him in the crowds of London.

"Robert! You haven't heard a word I've said." The dowager lifted her cane to rap it again and then thought better of the gesture. "Are

you still dwelling on that incident this afternoon?"

He started at the accuracy of her perceptions and then realized she was talking about the pick-purse. They had been returning to their carriage when the sly youth had run by and snatched the beaded reticule right out the dowager's hands.

Robert had given chase but lost the pick-purse in the crowd. He had just slowed down to look around when the young woman ran into him.

"There's no need to worry. The coachman apprehended him. See?" The dowager held up her reticule. "Please, tell me you are not silly enough to be upset that it wasn't you who was the hero on this occasion."

Robert had forgotten all about his mother's stolen accessory, but he said smoothly, "I'm simply happy it was returned to you in one piece."

"The coachman did say some young ladies delayed you. Something

about a silly miss taking a fall?"

"It was nothing, Mother. Nothing of consequence."

They enjoyed a few moments of silence, enough for Robert to wonder why he could not forget about such an inconsequential moment. He could go back to the apple seller and ask if he had caught the young woman's name, but Robert realized the futility of that. If by some miracle, he could find the exact fruit vendor, there was but a slim chance the man would remember one customer out of a crowd. And the likelihood of the modest young woman trumpeting her name and personal details to a London costermonger was even more of a fantasy.

"So, what then do you have on your mind?" The dowager could stand the quiet no longer and broke her son out of his thoughts again.

"I'm merely grateful you were not hurt when the thief ran by," Robert said.

“Nonsense,” the dowager sniffed. “I may be old, but I’m not frail.”

Robert smiled. “Had the pick-purse not been so fleet, I am certain he would have felt the strength of your cane.”

The dowager smiled at that but quickly put the improper thought out of their heads by changing the subject back to her immediate plans. “Now, Robert, you really must think about ordering some new clothes before the Season is truly underway.”

“Mother, please,” he begged, but his entreaties fell on deaf ears.

“You’ll be living at Dalwater Manor, and your presence will be duly noted. You shall be expected to go out, and you must look your best.”

“Why does my presence at Dalwater necessitate my participation in the Season’s events?” he asked.

“You are no longer living for yourself alone,” the dowager

explained. “You must think of your wards, Robert. Think of Abigail and Henry before you resign yourself to the life of a recluse. What would your sister think?”

“She never once bothered me about joining her at a ball, concert, or afternoon tea.”

The dowager gave an exasperated sigh. “Your sister would not want her children chained to a confirmed bachelor intent on avoiding all of society.”

“I do not avoid everyone,” Robert grumbled. “I attend my club; I see the Duke of Elsby often. I am not as reclusive as you suggest.”

“The point is, Robert, you must think of the children. They must have a mother, and that means you must find yourself a wife.”

Robert gave a rude bark of laughter. “Oh, so there it is! You intend to use your grandchildren to bring me to heel finally. I’m beginning to wonder if you did not bribe our monotonous barrister to add that

clause into the will yourself."

The dowager fumed. "Don't be ridiculous, Robert. You are meant to marry, and I intend to see you fulfill that duty. If not for yourself, then for your wards."

"I tried to take a wife once, remember, Mother? It seems not to be my fate."

It was painful, but the memory of Lady Isabel surfaced in Robert's mind. He had never liked dancing, but she was grace personified and they had often been seen on the dance floor together. He had proposed to her under his favorite oak tree on Dalwater's grand front lawn.

They had planned a late summer wedding and a honeymoon on the coast. If only he had known the true character of his bride-to-be, Robert would not have gone smiling into the eve of their doomed wedding.

“Please, Robert. Do not dwell on Lady Isabel. Everyone except you forgets that matter,” the dowager told him quietly.

“I simply do not believe the welfare of my niece and nephew depends on me finding a suitable wife this year,” Robert declared.

“They are children; they need a mother.”

Robert frowned at his own mother. “Abigail is seventeen; she is almost an adult herself. And Henry is no mere child. He is ten years old. Besides, I’ll have you to help me turn him into a fine, young man.”

“And watch you form him into a stubborn man like you?” The dowager lifted her nose in the air. “No, thank you.”

“See? You guide me already. The children will be fine; no wife needed,” Robert said.

The dowager lifted her eyebrows and employed the tactic she had been saving. "You're right about one thing, Abigail is seventeen, and that means she will be coming out this year."

Robert closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, fearing his mother had gotten the best of him yet again. "Have you asked her? What about her mourning period?"

"It has been six months and, besides, your sister always planned Abigail's debut to be at seventeen."

There was no possible way in which he could contradict his mother. All he could do was make one more effort. "Then she will need the very best hand to guide her, and thank goodness, she has the Dowager Duchess of Dalwater to be her chaperone."

"When the duke himself is available? I think not. It is your solemn duty to escort Abigail and dissuade all but the best suitors for her. Yes, exactly … use that fearsome scowl of yours to keep the cads at bay." The dowager beamed at Robert, victorious.

“Surely it is better for Abigail to be seen with your impressive personage.”

“Nonsense. You will chaperone your niece this Season, and that is the end of it.”

Robert bit back a groan and refused to speak until they reached Dalwater Manor. The Dowager happily accommodated his desire for silence, as she had nothing more to say. Instead, she looked out of the window with the clear and twinkling eyes of one with the upper hand. Her son could not help but glance in her direction every few minutes, opening his mouth slightly as if he had another argument, then pursing his lips as he realized he’d already lost.

When they finally pulled through the gates and up to the circular drive, Robert could not wait to quit the carriage. He helped his mother down, escorted her inside, and bellowed for Williams.

The butler, no doubt, was due for some lengthy instructions from

the dowager, after which Robert intended to make his escape.

The butler was longer in coming to him than usual, and the delay gave Robert the chance to notice the state of the Great Hall. Fresh cut flowers overflowed from every vase, the rugs had been shaken out and replaced, and every inch of the room gleamed from a recent cleaning. Williams arrived, already in his best livery, and carried an air of energy and anticipation with him.

"What are all these preparations for?" Robert asked.

Williams, as usual, deferred to the dowager. He gave her a low bow and announced, "Your instructions were followed to the letter, Your Grace. Five courses, fourteen dishes on the table, eight removes per course."

"Six dishes to remain available to our guests throughout the dinner." The dowager nodded. "Thank you, Williams."

"What lavish dinner plans are these?" Robert demanded.

The dowager gave him a serene smile. “I’ve invited the Duke and Duchess of Irrisoll to dine with us tonight. Don’t worry, Robert. You have plenty of time to rest and dress before they arrive.”

His valet arrived at that moment, holding a pair of his freshly-polished shoes.

Robert fought to keep a scowl off his face. “And what if I already have plans for the evening?”

“You have no pressing engagements, Robert, and you must eat,” the dowager said.

“Should I not be spending this time with my wards? The children and I need time to be together,” Robert said.

“The children always dine separately. Now, our guests should arrive in two hours, and we shall greet them in the Yellow drawing room.”

“Very good, Your Grace,” Williams intoned.

Robert opened his mouth to argue again but knew that anything not echoing the butler’s acquiescence would go unheard. No matter what objections or obstacles he attempted to mount, it seemed the dinner party was already planned. If he failed to attend, it would be seen as the height of rudeness.

As much as he despised his mother’s lengthy menus and the task of entertaining his guests, Robert knew his role all too well. He was a duke, and there was nothing he could do about that or the duties such a title entailed.

He could do nothing but climb the staircase to his rooms, trailed after by his valet, and prepare to greet their dinner guests.

It wasn’t until he was dressed in his best jacket, his cravat tied neatly, that he thought of the mysterious young woman he had rerun into, finding a few moments of respite from his station. His valet had

left after delivering a restorative glass of port, and Robert had a few moments to reflect over the memories that had not in any way faded. Still those emerald eyes glimmered on, and her rose-petal lips curved in the hint of a smile. She had been flustered and disheveled and a beautiful sight to behold. He was loath to let it go when the knock came announcing their guests had arrived.

Robert sensed his mother was up to more than simply entertaining with her dinner party plans, but he could not conceive what it might be until he descended the staircase. Through the arched front windows of Dalwater, he glimpsed the duke and duchess alighting from their carriage, followed by their daughter.

His mother joined him on the landing and smiled. “Her name is Lady Beatrice.”

Robert refused to speak but gave his mother his arm and escorted her to the Yellow drawing-room. Once inside, he grumbled to the dowager in low tones. “So, you are a matchmaker now? I warn you, Mother, I will not have suitable ladies thrown in my path.”

His thoughts flew to the young woman who had run directly into him, but his mother soon chased the pleasant memory away. “Lady Beatrice is quite beautiful. You will not be sorry for the introduction once you have seen her up close.”

He had no time to be sorry or not, as the drawing-room doors opened, and Williams announced the duke and duchess. He bowed to Lady Beatrice, who was indeed beautiful, and they were all soon seated near the fire.

First, there were the mandatory comments about the passing of time and the gladness at meeting again. Then, there were opinions shared about the weather and the winter to come. Finally, the topic of Robert’s recent guardianship came up.

“Noble of you to take on your sister’s children,” the Duke of Irrisoll declared.

The duchess agreed, but Lady Beatrice wrinkled her nose. “Children

are such a nuisance. I cannot imagine dealing with them. They must disrupt your life beyond repair."

"They are a blessing, I'm sure." Her mother tried to smooth over Lady Beatrice's ungenerous comment.

"I love my niece and nephew very much," Robert told the company.

The real blessing was how Williams arrived a moment later and announced dinner was served. Robert was sure he was supposed to be delighted to escort the lovely Lady Beatrice to the dining hall, but he had to grit his teeth against her vapid conversation.

"Such lovely roses," she said. "At Irrisoll, we make sure the colors match with our curtains and tapestries. It has a much more pleasant effect."

At dinner she criticized the firmness of the jellies, the crispness of the greens, and the flavor of the fresh-caught game. Lady Beatrice went on to turn her nose up at the dowager's favorite preserves, and

then complained about a footman standing in her line of sight. Her father ignored her sulky conversation, and her mother smiled serenely as if her daughter's comments were examples of elegant discernment.

Robert was uncertain how much longer he could sit politely across from her, and he was very glad for the distraction when the children came in to say goodnight.

"Let me present Miss Abigail and Mister Henry Allernach," Robert said.

Lady Beatrice's nose rose higher in the air as she looked over Abigail. She then, contrary to Abigail's obvious beauty, said, "Quite a plain child. I hope she will not prove a difficulty for you to marry off."

Robert watched his niece's face turn ashen and felt a fit of rising anger he found hard to swallow. On the other hand, Henry opened his mouth to retaliate at such an insult against his lovely sister, but luckily, he was removed by the housekeeper just in time.

At long length, the dinner was concluded, and Robert was more than happy to escort Lady Beatrice outside to the waiting carriage. He bowed to the Duke and Duchess of Irrisoll, sincerely hoping he would not have the displeasure of seeing them again for a long, long time. With that in mind, he quickly ushered the dowager back inside Dalwater before she could issue another invitation.

"Now, Robert, I wanted to speak with the duchess about their plans for next month. We shall endeavor to see them in London as often as we can," she told him.

"Why ever would we do that?" Robert asked, aghast.

"Really, Robert, you cannot be so obtuse. Lady Beatrice is an excellent match. I will concede her conversation is slightly lacking, but that is a trait you can easily remedy with your instruction."

Robert pinched the bridge of his nose. "Please, Mother, tell me you do not have designs on her becoming your daughter-in-law. After the

way she spoke of Abigail?"

"That is, again, something you can easily correct. Lady Beatrice is a beauty with the finest of lineages, and she would be a credit to Dalwater." The dowager insisted.

Exhausted by the evening and by his mother's machinations, Robert headed for the stairs. He could not escape the dowager's opinions, but he could not agree with her first choice for his wife. He did not wish to marry at all! The thought haunted him all night, and Robert rose early the next morning in the hopes of going out before seeing his mother.

It was ridiculous for Robert, Duke of Dalwater and head of the household, to creep down the stairs like a wayward child, but that is exactly what Henry caught him doing. "Good morning, Your Grace," Henry called.

Robert hastily gestured for the child to lower his voice. Then, in a whisper, he replied: "We don't wish to wake the entire household

now, do we?"

Henry grinned and followed his uncle down to the door leading to the stables. Once he was certain he could speak without censure, he asked: "Are you avoiding Grandmother?"

"I simply wanted to go out for the morning without waking anyone," Robert replied.

"You didn't want Grandmother to lecture you about the pretty lady anymore," Henry guessed.

Robert stopped. "You thought Lady Beatrice beautiful?"

Henry looked at his uncle, scrubbed his chin, and then decided he could be truthful. "She is beautiful to look at, but she speaks meanly."

Robert squeezed his young ward's shoulder. "I'm glad to hear you have developed an excellent sense of discernment, Henry."

The boy decided his uncle's compliment gave him an opening to ask, "May I come with you? Where are you going so early?"

"I'm going out for some exercise, fencing with the Duke of Elsby, and, no, you may not come," Robert told him.

Henry frowned. "Then, I may have to tell the dowager you have secretly stolen out."

Robert laughed, then remembered he did not wish to wake anyone and slapped a hand over his own mouth. The boy's bright eyes and stubborn chin reminded Robert of his dear older sister. "I'll tell you what, my would-be turncoat, we shall do. You will remain quiet about my whereabouts until after breakfast, and we will begin your fencing instruction this week."

Henry grinned again and followed Robert to the stables. There they found Abigail restlessly stroking her dappled grey and feeding the spoiled horse apples. She curtsied when she saw Robert, but there

was not so much as a trace of a smile about her lips.

He knew instinctively what had caused his lovely niece to droop. He greeted her gently and then told her: “Anyone with eyes will never doubt your beauty, niece, and false words have a way of blowing by when we know the truth.”

Abigail gave Robert a tremulous smile, and Henry delighted to see his sister cheered, gave their uncle a clumsy hug. “The duke is going out, but he promised he would teach me to fence this week.”

Abigail’s smile warmed, and she dropped a low, graceful curtsy. “Thank you, Your Grace. It is wonderful to see Henry excited about something again.”

Robert shooed the children back up to the house and soon galloped through the gates of Dalwater. He did not know why, but the children’s smiles stayed with him on his ride, and he arrived at Elsby’s estate with a grin on his face.

“You’re certainly in good spirits,” The Duke of Elsby remarked as his friend alighted. “You must have enjoyed dinner with Irrisoll, his wife … and beautiful daughter.”

Robert handed a stable boy the reins to his stallion and set Theo right immediately. “Lady Beatrice is as cruel and thoughtless as she is beautiful. The dowager plans to make her my wife, but I could not disagree more with her choice.”

They walked together to Elsby’s fencing pavilion while Theo chuckled. “Poor Lady Beatrice. She and her snobbery have gone two seasons without finding a suitable match and seem destined to do so again. I hope I do not follow her fate.”

“I cannot believe you wish for a wife, Theo, though I am certain you will have none of her impediments.” Robert heaved a sigh as they pulled on their fencing gear. “I only wish I could dissuade the dowager from giving up her matrimonial plans for me. She is determined to see her grandchildren have another mother.”

Theo brandished his foil. “What about a governess? My eldest sister has just hired a most excellent woman. She would recommend the agency she used to anyone. With a suitable governess in place, your mother would surely have significantly fewer worries about the children’s welfare.”

Robert took his position and raised his foil in the traditional salute. “Theo, that is such wonderful advice, I may actually let you win this round.”

The two friends laughed and then began their bout.

Chapter Six

Emma sat on a blanket in the back garden of the vicarage and marveled that only a week had gone by. The days were pleasant, but her worries followed her everywhere, and, even as she watched a small finch alight on the ground near her blanket, she could not keep from fretting about how her family would continue to fare in the future.

Whitehaven was far away, and her heart was wrung by worry every time she imagined never seeing it again. True, many people left home to seek employment and did not return, but she wished to be sure it was always there. If her father had to sell their home, Emma couldn't imagine breaking the news to her younger sister.

Elizabeth waved to her from the dining room windows. Cousin Matilda had awoken in what she called a 'polishing mood,' and every bit of silver was laid out on the dining room table. Emma couldn't

help but smile; her sister had not gotten up early enough to avoid their relative's frenetic energy.

Both girls had been alternatively entertained and exhausted by Cousin Matilda's constant desire to *do*, and there was a never-ending list of projects needing urgent attention at the vicarage.

The vicar himself was dozing in a wicker chair under one of the tall shade trees. Emma had noticed his wife's energy did not affect him. As many of the other men in his comfortable profession did, the vicar had hired a curate to take care of the parish. And it was that bright-eyed young man who appeared at the back gate with a letter for Emma.

"News from Whitehaven, I suppose," the curate ventured. "I hope that serves to cheer you, Miss Emma."

She thanked him kindly and resolved to keep her woes more carefully hidden. The curate had a sharp eye for the worries of his parishioners, but she did not wish to add to his burden. It was

difficult enough for her to keep her heavy heart from Elizabeth, and she hoped the letter would help buoy her spirits.

Unfortunately, the letter from her father was written in a shaky hand, and, though the news was purposefully cheerful, she could tell his health still suffered. Oh, how urgently she needed to find employment and ease his burden!

"Emma! Emma!" Elizabeth came rushing out, waking the vicar with a start.

"You moved so fast, I thought for a moment you were Cousin Matilda," Emma teased.

Her sister flopped down on the blanket next to her and tried to catch her breath. "All that silver. So early. Our cousin is a wonder."

The vicar turned a page in his book and settled his head back on the wicker chair. Birds chattered at them from the branches above, and Emma knew she should feel grateful for such a beautiful day. Still,

the thought of her stalled purpose in coming to London overshadowed every pleasant scene.

Emma reached out and smoothed her sister's hair. "This is truly a wonderful place. There are roses in your cheeks and a sparkle in your eyes. I so love to see you happy."

"I love to see you happy too," Elizabeth said. She handed Emma a note. "This is why I ran to you so fast. The note just arrived, and I'm certain it is from the agency."

Emma tried to keep a complacent smile on her face, but her fingers tore at the seal. The writing inside was Mr. Easton's, and her eyes flew over the sparse lines. She scrambled to her feet. "He requests my presence at the office without delay, and he hopes I have my affairs in order. Oh, Elizabeth! I do believe there is a position for me at last!"

Elizabeth was slow to rise, and there was a sheen of tears above her smile, but she squeezed her sister's hands and said, "I'm so glad for

you!”

“I must pack. I must get to the stagecoach right away!”

“You must be able to do everything all at once,” Elizabeth teased. She took Emma’s arm and led her slowly towards the house. “There’s plenty of time to share the good news with Cousin Matilda and enjoy our breakfast altogether.”

“Oh, Elizabeth! I’m sorry, but I must fly. I was late the last time and missed my chance. I will not replicate that error.”

Emma was dressed and ready for the stagecoach trip into the city in less than a half-hour. Elizabeth volunteered to pack the rest of her sister’s belongings in case the news was indeed good, and she would be immediately moving to the location of the governess position. Cousin Matilda had flown into the kitchen and, like a whirlwind, prepared food for Emma’s travels. Even the vicar had roused himself and escorted her to the stagecoach to stop himself.

Such was her determination and haste, Emma arrived at the agency well before Mr. Easton returned from his morning repast. She identified with her Cousin Matilda's strain when she had to sit for her husband's long sermons, and Emma fought to keep her urge to pace down to the occasional foot tapping. Luckily, the clerk did not reprimand her for her unladylike impatience, as he was contending with the usual line of worried salary seekers.

Emma watched as a young man was apprenticed to a stone mason and left his mother with a proud but worried smile. Two seamstresses offered to tailor the clerk's coat in return for a chance at a shop position. A timid little cook's insistence could hardly be heard over the din of the busy office, but she finally left with the name of a house that would be hosting dinners throughout the Season and needed the extra hands.

The London Season. Emma tried not to smile as she imagined her sister's introduction to society. The vicar and Cousin Matilda were not greatly connected, but their social circle was wide, and Emma could practically see Elizabeth dancing at her first ball already. If she could

earn decent wages, then Elizabeth could have all new dresses, and there would be no doubt of her finding an excellent match.

"Miss Fletcher, I was not certain I should see you today." Mr. Easton strode into the lobby, ignored the waiting line and the clerk, and flung open the door to his office.

Emma followed him in. "I came as soon as I could, Mr. Easton. I am dedicated to our shared endeavor and still desire nothing more than a good position as a governess."

"So, you've not accepted any proposals of marriage?" Mr. Easton shut the door behind them. "Are the men of Whitehaven and London to be so bereft?"

Was that a glimmer of a smile? Emma studied the serious Mr. Easton carefully as they both sat down. He seemed to be teasing her as he fished out an official letter and picked at the already broken seal. She could see it was a ducal stamp, which made it was difficult to concentrate on anything else, much less believe Mr. Easton capable

of teasing her.

"I did not seek out your matchmaker, Mr. Easton. Please forgive me, but I have stayed true to my original purpose."

"Yes, indeed." He did smile then and opened the letter. "And your patience has been rewarded, Miss Fletcher. I received this urgent missive yesterday, calling for a governess with a talent for all ladylike pursuits, including drawing."

"I accept," Emma said.

Mr. Easton raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps you'd be so kind as to let me explain the position? This agency recently had the distinction of placing a governess for the Duke of Elsby's sister, and he has been so kind as to recommend our services to another of the peerage. We must ensure this is a good fit."

"Yes, sir. I apologize."

“Well, then.” Mr. Easton unfolded the letter and cleared his throat. “The Duke of Dalwater has two wards, his niece and nephew. The girl has been raised for the last seventeen years with the utmost care. She is herself, a very accomplished young woman. They are, therefore, in need of someone with unmatched skills and gentle air. There is also a boy, aged ten, and he will need lessons as well as a firm hand to guide his deportment.”

Emma nodded and kept nodding. The family name of Dalwater was ancient, the succession of dukes above all reproach, and the family’s seat was not far from where from Cousin Matilda’s house, where Elizabeth was to remain.

Mr. Easton saw her eagerness and sat back for a moment. “This will be a challenging position, Miss Fletcher. The standards will be incredibly high.”

“It will be an honor,” Emma said.

Pleased by her modest reply, Mr. Easton nodded, then glanced back at the letter. "You will be well-compensated, though you will appreciate there will be no possibility of time off to travel back to Whitehaven."

"I understand, Mr. Easton, and I am prepared."

"The letter requests your presence at Dalwater Manor as soon as possible," Mr. Easton informed her. "They mean, of course, for you to go this very day."

Emma swallowed hard. She could not afford to travel back and forth on the stagecoach to fetch her things and hire a carriage to take her to Dalwater. Her fingers clutched at her reticule, unable to express her difficulties.

Mr. Easton sighed, guessing her troubles. "I can send another note to the vicarage, requesting your things be sent."

"Thank you, sir, but I am unsure of how to secure a carriage."

Emma bit her lip at the untruth. She knew very well how to hire a hackney, but she simply could not afford it.

A sharp rap on the door interrupted the awkward pause, and the clerk popped his head inside. "It has arrived, Mr. Easton. You should see it!"

Mr. Easton scowled at the clerk. "We do not stand around and stare at our client's conveyances, Donald."

He shooed the clerk out of the door and stood up to escort Emma from his office and through the lobby. At the front door, he paused and said: "I'm glad that our client is as punctual as you, Miss Fletcher. See that you keep up such high standards as will be expected."

She looked down the steps and saw the gleaming carriage. Its bright paint bore no scratches, and the splashboards seemed immune to mud. A team of four horses pranced in the traces as every spectator for a half-mile came to stare. The neighborhood was a decent one, but

it was not often the residents saw a duke's carriage. A well-dressed coachman hopped down and opened the door.

"That is for me?" Emma sputtered.

Mr. Easton cleared his throat, perhaps to cover a chuckle, and said, "You must never let your awe get in the way of your duties, Miss Fletcher."

Emma looked at the grand carriage, then down at her traveling costume in despair. It was purchased new for the trip from Whitehaven, but now the long dove-gray coat and matching skirt seemed dull. Even her butter-yellow scarf was a muted shade, and Emma tucked it into her collar fretfully.

"I would not recommend anyone not fit for a position, Miss Fletcher. You may cease your worries." Mr. Easton took her arm and propelled her down the front steps. "You look every bit a modest governess made for a grand house."

Emma stopped and drew herself up properly. “Thank you, Mr. Easton. I will endeavor every day to make the agency proud.”

The stern man was pleased and assured her again that her things would be sent for immediately. He then handed her into the carriage himself. “Good luck to you, Miss Fletcher.”

She was tucked inside the richly decorated compartment before she could blink. The carriage somehow seemed familiar, but Emma was certain it felt so in the way that dreams somehow leak into everyday life. She clutched her reticule and marveled at the smoothness of the ride as the carriage pulled away from the curb and took her towards her new position at Dalwater Manor.

The clattering bustle in the grimy streets of London flew by, and Emma felt as if she was floating in a bubble of silk. She had never traveled in such luxury before, never even dreamed it was possible. It was hard not to enjoy the heads turning as the gleaming carriage drove on. Soon, the rattles and stops of the city’s cobbled streets were left behind, and they glided into the London countryside. The fine

team of horses pulled as one under the coachman's expert hand. Between that and the sprung suspension of the wheels, Emma imagined they floated on a fast river.

Soon, the smooth-flowing ride took them through the gates of Dalwater Manor, and the horses were finally drawn up to a walk. Even though the chill rains of winter had already doused the city, there were still roses blooming at Dalwater. Emma saw heavily laden bushes boasting blooms in almost every color of the rainbow. Then they entered a heavily shaded avenue of ancient oak trees. It served to shelter the smooth driveway to the manor house and obscured the view until it emerged suddenly it all its perfection. As was customary, the carriage paused at the opening of the trees and gave its lone passenger the best possible view of her future residence.

Dalwater Manor stood on a plateau of large, sweeping lawns, interrupted only by the circular driveway of bright crushed coral. The estate itself occupied thousands of acres, with the house like a bright jewel at its center. The manor's façade was Jacobean, built in the 1600s, and stood two stories tall, with a grand columned walk

guarding the front entrance. Carefully pruned yew trees grew up against the building between the gleaming windows, perfectly mirroring the columns. Two large, rounded towers guarded each end of the main building, capped with copper that shone in the bright sun.

From there, two large wings spread out to the north and south, sheltering the many stables and outbuildings no doubt concealed behind them.

Emma gazed at the grandeur, barely aware of her heartbeat or breath. In all her desperate daydreams of employment, she had never conjured anything as elegant as Dalwater Manor. And, now, as the carriage smoothly flew towards the house, she felt faint from her overwhelming good fortune.

The carriage drove past the entrance to the circular driveway, down a long road past the south wing, and then swung onto another path that led to the servants and delivery entrance. There, Emma expected to alight herself, and she was surprised when the coachman jumped

down and opened the carriage door for her. He handed her down to the ground as he would any grand lady, and she felt her cheeks warm at the kindness.

He saw her modest delight and tipped his hat. “Welcome to Dalwater Manor, miss.”

She dropped him a neat curtsy and replied breathlessly, “Thank you.”

There was no time for Emma to breathe, much less be nervous, as the door to the servant’s entrance flew open, and a footman appeared. His livery was more elegant than the best of servants in Whitehaven wore, and Emma tried to keep her eyes from the bright gold braids and frogging on his jacket. The footman did not glance at the coachman or Emma herself, only held the door open and indicated she should hurry.

The servants’ entrance led to a wide back hall, evidently where all the household’s main deliveries were brought to. Huge baskets stood

against the walls full of fresh supplies just dropped off that morning.

Emma caught sight of smoked meats, bags of sugar, and a heaped pile of pineapples. Large, arched doors led from the servants' hall on all sides, and, as she was hurried along, Emma saw the stairway down to the steaming laundry, the shadowed expanse of the pantries, and the bustling territory of an enormous kitchen.

"There you are. Frederick, fix that tie!" A sharp voice brought the footman up short, and Emma froze behind him.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Williams," the footman said. He fumbled with his perfectly smooth tie.

"And is this the woman the agency sent?" Mr. Williams strode down the servants' hallway with an imperious air.

Emma curtsied low and then stood still for the man's intense scrutiny. Dressed as he was, in an impeccable black suit, she guessed Mr. Williams was the butler and, therefore, the head of the household

staff.

Mr. Williams completed his circle around her and looked down over the bridge of his nose. “Yes. Well, Mr. Easton claimed he had a fine candidate for the governess, and I see he is a man of his word. I hope your skills live up to your credentials, Miss Fletcher.”

She curtsied again and kept her gaze on the ground.

“Come then,” Mr. Williams snapped. He led the way down the servants’ hall to the largest of doors.

It opened onto a great hall, and it was all Emma could do not to stumble as she followed the butler’s quick pace. Dalwater’s hall was two stories high, with a promenade around the second floor. Towering columns of marble reached to the arched ceiling that was crowned with a glass cupola. Sunlight poured in and lit the finest rugs and furniture Emma had ever seen in her life. Luckily, the butler’s pace was so fast she had no time to gape at the sights around her and had to race after him to the foot of the grand staircase.

There, a woman stood with her hands folded tightly over her generous waist. “Excellent, Mr. Williams,” she said to the butler. “I am glad the agency was able to keep its word so punctually.”

“May I present Mrs. Brown? She is the housekeeper here at Dalwater Manor, and it is she who will oversee your work.” Mr. Williams bowed curtly, spun on his heel, and went about his business.

Emma blinked at the abrupt handover and then glanced shyly at Mrs. Brown. The older woman waited until the butler had disappeared, and then she gave Emma a broad smile. “Never fear, Miss Fletcher. We aren’t all as severe as Mr. Williams. Come now, dear. Let’s get you settled.”

The housekeeper led the way up the grand staircase, and Emma followed, dizzy at how fast her fate had transformed itself from earlier that morning.

Chapter Seven

“The north wing is quite impressive, built this century by a very famous architect. You will see it one day, I am sure. For now, though, please follow me through the gallery.” Lucy Brown, the housekeeper, bustled to the second floor and off down a long, spacious room.

Emma trailed after her, worried her eyes weren’t able to take in all the grandeur. She wondered if, perhaps, the peerage were born with a greater capacity to take in such sights. The gallery itself had towering ceilings, and paintings were hung up the walls to the crown molding. Step after step, they went, and great works still arched over Emma like columns covered in the ornate hieroglyphs of unknown Misters. Unknown to her at least, the housekeeper nodded to a half dozen and gave the artist’s name as if they were a natural fact everyone should know.

The gilded frames eventually gave way to portraits, with the most honored displayed above the narrow and blazing fireplace gracing the last quarter of the gallery.

Feeling the austere stare of the duke's grand ancestor looking down upon her, Emma finally stumbled to a halt. "Surely, there's no need for me to intrude on the family's private rooms, Mrs. Brown," she said to the housekeeper.

Lucy Brown shook her head and hefted open the next door. Emma could see she was entering the rounded southern tower from the windows, and she was delighted to discover it was the sunniest and most inviting sitting room she had ever seen.

The housekeeper beamed. "This is a wonderful, grand house, and it does my heart good to see it occupied again."

Emma tamed her smile and tried again to explain her discomfort. "I understand my position as a servant to the family, and there is no need for me to be quartered so close."

“There is the hallway to the Mister’s quarters. This is the door that leads to the children’s rooms. Those open onto the schoolroom, and here are your chambers.” Lucy Brown bustled through a narrower, more discreet door and led the way once more.

Tucked behind the schoolroom was a large bedchamber. Emma halted in the doorway and felt her jaw go slack. There was enough room for a pleasant sitting area around the fireplace, generously furnished with two chairs and a lopsided settee. A canopied bed stood against the opposite wall, and beyond it was a pleasant view out over the kitchen gardens.

Lucy Brown beckoned her over to admire the sunny windowsill. Emma peeked out shyly and then stepped back. The heavy velvet of the canopy brushed the back of her hand, and she bit her lip from exclaiming aloud its exquisite softness.

“There must be some mistake, Mrs. Brown. I cannot stay here,” Emma told the housekeeper.

Lucy Brown ignored her. “Mister Henry’s room shares your same view, though he is farther along and sees mostly the pond and stream. Lady Abigail is across the hall so she may enjoy the front lawns; they are stunning in the morning.”

“But, Mrs. Brown, I have never stayed anywhere so grand.”

“Please, call me Lucy Brown,” the housekeeper remarked. She then went to the gleaming wardrobe that stood in the corner by the door. She flung open its heavy doors and frowned at the empty shelves. “Now, I thought your things had already arrived. I will ring for your maid.”

Emma thought she might need somewhere to sit down as she was feeling quite light-headed. Perhaps it was the long walk and the way she’d let her head swivel around in her wild attempt to see all the artwork. She moved towards the quaint gathering of furniture in front of her fireplace, in her new bedchamber, and Emma had to bump herself down on the soft bed. She had never imagined her job would

land her in such comfortable surroundings.

"Don't worry, Miss Fletcher. You'll be very happy here, I am sure." Lucy Brown drew Emma's attention to a small writing desk standing near the sunny window. "If you find yourself feeling homesick, there is plenty of ink and paper for you to write your family."

"Plenty of paper?" Emma blinked. Her father had only a limited supply at home and she had often had to content herself with scraps of envelopes or the backside of unfinished and discarded pages.

"If you run out, there is more in the schoolroom." Lucy Brown checked the fire was crackling warmly in the grate. "I have just enough time to show you the schoolroom if you'd like."

"Yes, please. Thank you." Emma stopped herself, afraid that if she let out the swelling tide of gratitude she felt, she might drown them both.

Lucy Brown gestured for Emma to lead the way, a test to see if the

young governess had a good head on her shoulders. She smiled when Emma led the way confidently and said with obvious pride, “You will find the duke very welcoming; he is a fairest and compassionate Mister. It was the duke himself who insisted you take up residence amongst the family rooms. He worries the children will want extra nurturing as they have just lost their parents.”

Emma stood at the front of the schoolroom and folded her hands at her waist. “Mr. Easton told me of the tragedy. They are most lucky to have His Grace as their guardian.”

The dark wood floor and chair rail had been polished to a high gleam. The whitewash on the walls was fresh and bright, and the furniture thoughtfully arranged. A round table, suitable for lessons, sat under the window. Two swaybacked shelves were packed with primers, books of mythology, and poetry. And, on the newly woven rug stood a perfect miniature of a tenant farm. It’s barn, paddock, and field implements were carved with precision and painted with an intricate hand.

“A gift from the duke’s grandfather,” Lucy Brown told Emma. “He believed landowners needed to know the work of their tenants in order to Mister the profits. His Grace especially studied this subject as a child.”

Emma noticed small gnaw marks on the arm of a, particularly tall farmer. “From a young age, it appears.”

Both women laughed, and the interlude made Lucy Brown sigh happily. “Ah, there’s the sound this wing has been missing. Oh, Miss Fletcher, I do hope you feel welcome here because Dalwater Manor is glad of you.”

At the door, Emma took one more look over the schoolroom. There was even an ancient terrarium, an artist’s easel, and an overflowing basket of embroidery silk and scraps. Her heart swelled as she imagined Elizabeth’s joyous reaction to such a room. What projects they could accomplish, what experiments and discussions they could have! Emma pressed a hand to her heart and hoped she could extend the sisterly love she felt there to her new charges.

A heavy clanking in the hallway interrupted them, and Lucy Brown hurried Emma back along to her bedchamber. “Oh, that reminds me! His Grace was also adamant that you join the family for dinner tonight. He wondered what sort of welcome it would be if you were made to eat alone in your room. He doesn’t want the children to be shy of you, and he wants a chance to see you all together.”

Emma swallowed hard. “Dinner? Tonight?”

Lucy Brown smiled at the governess’s stunned face and repeated: “His Grace requests you dine with the family tonight.”

“Impossible,” Emma muttered.

“Ah, never doubt the duke, my dear.” Lucy Brown bustled around the bedchamber and revealed the full wardrobe. “Your things arrived only moments before you. I had the laundry maids shake out and press everything. I believe you will find it satisfactory.”

A burble of incredulous laughter escaped Emma's lips. "Satisfactory? My entire trunk has just appeared as if by magic!"

Lucy Brown beamed. "His Grace does not like to waste time."

"Mr. Easton must have known I would take the position and accepted it for me," Emma reasoned.

"As well he should," Lucy Brown said decidedly. She stepped out of the way as a parade of footmen arrived with large buckets of water.

"I apologize," Emma said. "I am grateful for this position, and I am more than happy to comply with His Grace's edicts."

"Dinner is not an edict but an invitation. A lovely thing like yourself could likely garner more such invitations if she were washed and dressed," Lucy Brown teased.

Together they considered Emma's limited wardrobe and decided on

a crisp linen dress. The creamy beige color served to highlight the lively glow in Emma's cheeks. In her endearingly busy but nosy way, Lucy Brown made sure Emma had a hairbrush, pins, and every other small necessity a woman could need.

She then pulled a small bottle from her pocket and added it to Emma's sparse selection of toiletries. "It's a bottle of rose water. I make it myself from the generous bushes you may have noticed at the gate."

Emma sniffed the delicate, yet heady, rose water and thanked Lucy Brown profusely. "I've never had a bottle of scent, and I did notice those roses-what a wonder! To wear their perfume is far too much of a luxury for someone like me."

"Or me?" Lucy Brown raised an eyebrow. "I find a dab at the ear and the wrist keeps me fresh all day, no matter what my work."

If Emma intended to argue, her words were stopped short when the footmen declared their work done. She turned and discovered her

quaint little sitting area had been pushed aside. Now, a deep copper bathtub had been placed in front of her fireplace and filled to the brim with water. Her cheeks began to burn as she thought of bathing in a strange house, stripping off her traveling gown … and everything underneath.

"Now, don't tell me the luxury of a bath is too good for the likes of you as well," Lucy Brown teased. "We have no shortage of fresh water here at Dalwater, and everyone is expected to use it."

"Yes, ma'am," Emma squeaked. The idea of completely submerging herself still had her head reeling. She had bathed as a child when she still fit in the kitchen laundry basin, but it had been years since she moved on to bathing at her washstand.

"Keep in mind, Miss Fletcher, that we aim to please and impress our employers." The housekeeper laid a fluffy towel next to the bath. She pulled a bar of soap from her apron and brandished it at the governess. "There is also plenty of soap, so scrubbing is encouraged."

Emma glanced down and found her fingernails did look grubby, and she could feel the dust of the stagecoach travel thick on her cheeks. “Of course, ma’am.”

“Then we will see you at dinner.” Lucy Brown bustled out of the bedchamber and shut the door tight behind her.

Again, Emma bumped down onto the edge of the bed. She pressed a shaky hand to her forehead and considered all that had changed since she had awakened that morning. Then, taking a deep breath, she set about unbuttoning her travel dress. A timid knock at the door froze her progress, but she quickly dismissed the maid and continued into the bath by herself.

The warm water covered Emma up to her neck, and she could hear her heart pounding hard because of the strange, yet wonderful, sensation. She scrubbed, rinsed, and scrubbed again until her skin felt fresh and shone bright pink. It was almost a shame, she mused, that her beige linen dress should cover up such a lively color.

Once she was dressed, Emma noted she was too plain to do such a grand house any credit. Sighing deeply, she reminded herself she was a servant, and it was best to blend into the background whenever possible. With that in mind, she quietly headed back through the rounded tower sitting room and into the long gallery.

Emma braced herself, thinking the cavernous room would be unnerving at dusk, and ended up laughing in delight. The long room was lit with numerous candelabra and elegant wall sconces. Thick, fragrant beeswax candles burned without guttering or smoking, and Emma saw the paintings come to life under the generous illumination. Thoroughly convinced His Grace must be an equally generous host, Emma rushed along with the gallery, anxious to be on time for dinner.

She descended the wide staircase at a fast trot but stopped short on the landing when she saw the sunset blazing through the round, south-facing window. From there, Emma saw only the roofs of the many outbuildings, and the view seemed to continue to infinity. Beyond the far horizon along Whitehaven Harbor, she had never

imagined a view so vast as the acres of Dalwater Manor presented to the eye. It took her full fear of being late for dinner to tear her eyes from the impressive sunset finally.

Above her, Emma heard a lady's maid scold a footman and realized the family was about to descend. She hurried across the Great Hall and let herself into the servants' door that skirted behind the dining hall. There, before the narrow walkway split into a labyrinth, she found the butler's parlor. The butler himself, Mr. Williams, was checking the soup tureens and polishing the ladles.

"Ah, Miss Fletcher, I appreciate your punctuality," the butler said. "Here, allow me to escort you into the dining hall."

Mr. Williams ushered Emma into the brightly lit room, and she breathed an audible gasp of admiration. Even more, candles blazed in every corner. Shimmering silver plates reflected the light from the wall sconces, and more polished silver circles bounced the light across laden sideboards. The inside wall was dominated by a wide-mouthed fireplace, where a fire blazed invitingly, throwing out heat.

Above was a splendid marble mantel bearing an enormous pair of branching candelabras, their light reflected in the vast looking-glass behind. The dining hall faced north, away from the sunset's warm highlights, yet the room seemed every inch as warm and sun-filled.

"Please wait here, Miss Fletcher. After the family is seated, I will announce you." Mr. Williams gave her a quick bow and returned to his place in the hidden pantry.

Emma stood to the side as the Duke of Dalwater entered with an elderly lady, clearly the Dowager Duchess, on his arm. They promenaded in the stately fashion past the footmen and took their seats as regally as if observed by royalty. But it was only Emma who watched, daring only briefly to lift her shy gaze from the sumptuous Turkey rug beneath her feet to glimpse their grandeur. Emma's was the demure shadow that jumped as the door to the butler's pantry flew open, and Mr. Williams entered with a dignified flourish.

"Your Grace. The Dowager Duchess, may I present Miss Emma

Fletcher, newly-appointed governess to the wards of Dalwater." Mr. Williams extended an arm in Emma's direction and then bowed low.

The dowager waved a dismissive hand while her imperious eye traveled over the soup course. On the other hand, the duke rose to his feet and turned to greet Emma with a direct look and a nod. He turned, his ash blond hair glinting the color of the candlelight, and Emma bumped nervously back into the wall.

It was him!

The tall gentleman who had knocked her apples all over the road! His were the same gold-flecked eyes now regarding her so closely. He turned, his head held high by a superior cravat, and nodded to Emma even as his eyes opened wide in surprise. She thought he might have actually smiled, but then Emma felt the butler step over to aid her.

"No need to linger over introductions, Miss Fletcher." Mr. Williams smoothly propelled her to her seat at the long table. "Let your welcome be esteem enough."

Emma sat gratefully and hid her trembling hands under the milk-white tablecloth. She tried to concentrate on the fine needlepoint that traveled the edge of the long cloth, but her every sense was focused on *him*.

The gentleman from Covent Garden was the Duke of Dalwater. His Grace! Instead of snapping at him for being a bother, as she had done, forthwith she must always bow and call him 'Your Grace.'

A footman stepped forward to help serve the first course, and Emma was forced to look up and choose her soups from the vast array of tureens on the table. Finally, given her first choice, Emma determined to look at nothing but her soup. No, she couldn't do that—her generous employers would think her simple in the head! Her gaze darted up, caught His Grace looking at her, and then flew wildly about the room.

Emma tried to slow her gaze and behave as if she were merely taking in the room. The lavishly decorated, golden dining hall: two-

tone painted silk on the walls reflected the golden candlelight, and, instead of silver, the mirrors behind the wall sconces were burnished gold, as were the candleholders on the table. The wide fireplace was white marble with gold leaf, and Emma marveled at how pleasant the heat was from a good six feet away. At the parsonage, she used to perspire all through dinner as the fire roared directly behind her.

She looked again at her host and found his golden-hazel eyes glancing back at her. His Grace smiled and repeated his polite nod in her direction. Emma had no choice but to bow her head and acknowledge his greeting with a smile. Her only hope was that he did not recognize her as the poor, awkward woman who had sprawled all over the sidewalk in front of him.

Robert had to force himself to look away. The desire to curl up his lips and smile unreservedly at Miss Emma Fletcher was almost too hard to resist. He was delighted to see the interesting young woman from Covent Garden before him, and her modest embarrassment was most endearing.

It was almost a game to catch her glance stealing up from the demure eating of her soup. No, Robert reminded himself, he mustn't tease her. Especially not when the dowager's hawk-eyes might catch him.

The entrance into the children's dining hall, along with the change to the second course, distracted him enough to calm his unbridled grin. He noticed that Miss Fletcher was instantly attentive to their arrival. She shot encouraging smiles at both Abigail and Henry and seemed to relax in their presence. Well, well … Miss Emma as their governess.

He found himself looking forward to seeing much more of her, especially as her startle of surprise caused the children to smile. Then, there seemed to settle over the four of them an air of sympathetic unity as the dowager started her tirade about the Season again.

Chapter Eight

Robert wished he could make reference to their meeting in Covent Garden and forge a closer acquaintance with Miss Emma. What if he mentioned apples? No, that would remind her of the unfortunate fall. Should he ask after her health? Robert had to bite his lip in indecision. If he tried to acknowledge their former connection, he was certain the object of his interest would turn crimson, and his mother would stab him with a disapproving stare.

"How have you been enjoying London, Miss Emma?" Robert went against all his gentlemanly advice. "Have you had time to enjoy any sightseeing yet?"

"I came to London merely grateful for the chance to work, Your Grace," Emma replied.

"Did you stay in a hotel?" Henry asked. He bounced forward,

making his chair creak. “I’ve always wanted to stay in a hotel.”

“Better to stay with friends or family,” Emma told the eager young boy. “I stayed with my mother’s cousin at her husband’s vicarage.”

“Acreage?” Henry misunderstood.

“Vicarage - the home where the vicar of the parish lives,” Emma corrected him gently. She then smiled at him. “Though he did have quite an extensive garden.”

Her moderate voice and easy joke impressed Abigail, who looked up and took note of her new teacher. Robert watched his niece’s smile warm as Emma threw her a quick, conspiratorial smile. Henry, content with his part of the proper, grown-up conversation, went back to eating.

“What sights is she to have seen, Robert? For goodness sake, I do hope you improve your conversation before the next ball. Lady Beatrice is quite a natural and graceful speaker,” the dowager added

loudly.

Robert braced himself for another onslaught of his mother's opinions and plans. He was forced to hang on to her every word until he wished the last course was done. Though wish finally granted, he found himself disappointed when dinner was over in what seemed too short a time. The children and their charming, new governess disappeared together across the Great Hall, and the dowager reluctantly let him go off to his study alone.

He drew the heavy curtains and poured himself a drink. Then, glancing over his shoulder at the closed door, Robert slipped off his shoes with a sigh. He eased into his favorite armchair and lifted his feet onto the ottoman closest to the fire.

The warmth on his toes relaxed the rest of his body, but Robert kept tensing as he remembered moments from dinner. First, there was the lost moment where he might have let surprise reveal the earlier connection between himself and Miss Emma. Then, the dowager's imperial interruptions. The children were, thankfully, delightful, but

Robert feared he was still too stiff towards them. Between his stares and the dowager's loud, scheming declarations about the forthcoming Season, Robert was sure the new governess thought they were all mad.

Emma Fletcher. Emma. Robert tried her name out again and again in his head. So elegant and yet unassuming, like the woman herself. And, he knew he was not alone in his high regard. The children had taken to her encouraging smiles and her gentle tones; they had all gone off together upstairs as one happy crowd.

He stretched his toes in front of the fire and tried not to be jealous of their easy company. If he needed company, the dowager was always available for after-dinner conversation. Robert sighed and took a long, slow sip of his drink. His mother was relentless in her plans for the upcoming Season. At dinner alone, she had covered the first balls, concerts, and exhibitions which were suited for her matchmaking purposes. Robert groaned as he wondered if the new governess had missed her machinations. He did not want his household thinking he was in search of a wife!

He shuddered. If his indispensable Lucy Brown ever thought there was a chance for matrimony and more children at Dalwater, she would follow the dowager to the ends of England. Doubtless even Williams would lend a hand to the scheme, as he always enjoyed showing off his flawless service to fashionable parties. And what of the children? Surely, they did not need the injury of thinking their beloved parents could be replaced so soon?

The more Robert thought about it, the more he wondered if Fate had delivered Miss Emma to his doorstep. The agency had been able to find him someone so highly qualified seemingly in an instant; that it turned out to be the same girl who had enlivened his senses in Covent Garden was little short of a miracle.

Could there be any other explanation? The universe was somehow shaping their lives to be together. He finished his drink and shook off such fanciful thoughts.

If he really did conjure her by his own daydreaming, what could he

possibly do now? Her appropriate decorum kept her from him in more frustrating ways than walls ever could. And, she was supposed to be below his notice.

The truth was, the lovely Miss Emma Fletcher drew his focus more than anything or anyone else had in years. He should be concentrating on his business ventures in the colonies, or Napoleon's movements, or buying the new carriage his mother insisted upon for the Season, but all he could see in his mind's eye was Emma's sparkling emerald-green eyes.

No. Robert stopped himself. He was not a foolish man. It was merely an interesting situation, that was all. What was the probability of running into the same woman who was to become his ward's governess? He wondered if Miss Emma had a head for numbers. Perhaps he could check on her qualifications, verify she was indeed capable of managing his wards' education.

He pondered the pleasant thought of dropping by the schoolroom the next day, finished his drink, and then sat dreamily sipping at the

empty glass.

What would Theo say if he could see him now? Robert grinned and shouldered himself deeper into his armchair. Somehow, the restless energy which usually sent him out to the club almost every night was gone. He was more curious about the comforts of his own home; did Emma like her accommodations? Was she frightened at being torn away from her sister and deposited in a stranger's house? No.

Miss Emma seemed a sensible type, shy but not a cowering mouse. He imagined her marching bravely along with the upstairs gallery and not getting lost for one second, despite the confusing curve of the round tower sitting room. He was certain he would see her looking hale and hearty at breakfast.

Robert jumped out of his chair and poured himself another drink. Looking forward to an innocent run-in at breakfast was not something he believed himself capable of doing. Where was the reserve and dignity of his station?

The dowager bustled in and saved him from berating himself. “Now, Robert, you absolutely must pull yourself together about this whole governess situation,” she said.

He bit back a smile and poured her a drink too. “Here, Your Grace, you seem to have weathered a shock.”

“Shock? Yes! It was a horrendous shock to realize a perfect stranger had been invited to live in my home without my consent!”

Robert mulled happily over his mother’s use of the phrase ‘perfect stranger.’ Emma certainly did appear to his fancy to be perfect, and he wondered what could possibly jar him from that idealistic view of the new governess. “She is quite perfect, isn’t she?” he dared say aloud.

“Really, Robert!” The dowager swatted at him, then took her drink and settled on the leather sofa.

Robert returned to his chair, slipped his shoes back on, and asked

his mother in a weary voice, “You’ve broken our evening tradition, Mother. Really. Whatever is the matter?”

“Why was I not consulted?” the dowager complained.

“Until the will was read, you cared for your grandchildren on your own. I thought it was my place to take over their care and let you go back to living your life undisturbed,” Robert said.

“And this is what you call undisturbed?” She sipped her drink, dabbed her chin with her handkerchief, and pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. “I could barely eat tonight at dinner, and I was so distraught.”

“And yet you managed to speak at length perfectly well,” Robert teased.

The dowager swatted at him again. “Did you even hear a word I said? I could have sworn that every time I looked up, you were studying that new woman.”

“I wanted to see that she was mannered, kind, and warm to the children. They certainly seemed to take to her quickly.”

“Yes, well,” his mother spoke begrudgingly, “she is fresh and smiling, I’ll say that. Of course, they were charmed by her. That doesn’t mean she is the one they need to guide their futures.”

“And I haven’t asked her to do so,” Robert said. His patience was growing thin. His mother had intruded upon his territory, his after-dinner sanctuary, and now she was double-guessing his decisions.

“Ah, Williams, finally,” the dowager exclaimed as the butler appeared with a silver tray. “Do you think that Fletcher woman is well-suited to guide my grandchildren’s futures?”

Mr. Williams’ mouth tightened slightly at the corners, but he did not let his distress show in any other way. He serenely poured the dowager a cup of hot cocoa while murmuring a non-committal sound.

The dowager scowled. “Of course, it was Mr. Williams who related to me the governess’s good references.”

Robert looked at his butler and sympathized. Obviously, the servant had been cornered after dinner and forced to tell every detail of the governess’s hiring. It was certainly the dowager had called upon his lifelong loyalty to confess where the plan originated. He couldn’t imagine what would have happened if the order for the hiring of a governess had come from anyone but Robert himself. Someone would have been crying or fired, that night for sure.

He wanted to pretend he had no idea why the presence of the governess made his mother feel so thwarted. Of course, Robert himself was trying to use the governess as a buffer between him and undesired matrimony. Would the decorous Miss Emma be mortally offended if she found out why he had expedited her hiring? Should he confess his sins now or wait to be called out?

No. Robert swirled his drink, took another sip, and reminded himself that he was the Duke of Dalwater. He was guardian to Abigail

and Henry. He was merely following the excellent advice of his friend Theo. Robert almost smiled; wouldn't Theo love to know that he had almost pinned the whole upset on him. He should have gone to the club to meet up with his friend so his mother could not have cornered him so easily.

"Good references do not guarantee good manners, though. Wasn't she quite querulous about her living quarters?" the dowager asked Mr. Williams.

"She worried over her proximity to the family," the butler replied.

The dowager could see that particular sin did not horrify her son as much as she would like, so she tried again. "And she stole into the dining hall through the servants' door instead of waiting at the staircase where she was told to be."

"She thought it best to be out of the way when the family descended." Both Robert and the dowager were surprised at how the butler spoke without invitation, appearing to defend Emma, albeit

politely. He bowed to them both: “Please excuse me, Your Grace.”

“See? She’s upset the whole household,” the dowager concluded. She waved a relieved Williams out of the room. “I won’t let this change my plans, Robert.”

Robert eyed his glass and wished he could avoid both his mother’s conversation and her matrimonial machinations. She again tried to rail about the distraction a perfect stranger caused to the household: Lucy Brown must be beside herself, she opined, and poor Williams was so distracted, he had actually spoken before being asked. It was all quite shocking! How could he have been so thoughtless to have brought this on them at such a crucial time?!

“It will take careful thought and consideration in accepting only the right invitations to make a success of this Season. We cannot be expected to consider another person. I do hope you are not planning that Miss Fletcher should act as a chaperone as well.”

Robert stared into the fire. The possibility had not occurred to him,

but now that his mother had mentioned it, he was curious to see how Emma would fare out in society. Would she still pull his focus from every surrounding subject?

The Dowager continued her complaints, used to Robert's close-mouthed ways. "I will give you that a larger entourage is always preferable. It's impressive for Abigail to have a personal chaperone as well as her uncle. Although we shall have to make some considerable expenditure to have the governess dressed properly."

"The Duke of Elsby can give me the name of his sisters' favorite seamstress, I'm sure," Robert spoke up finally.

His mother rattled her cup and saucer. "Now, Robert, you must not let this added personage distract you from your cause! She is an interruption. Nothing more."

Robert could not help himself: "An interruption? What exactly do you mean?"

“Your life has changed directions, Robert. Surely you knew it as soon as Abigail and Henry became your wards? Now, you are off down a new path, and you suddenly see every possible off-shoot. Do not lose sight of where you want to be!”

“And where is that, Mother?”

The dowager gave him a pitying smile. “Why, here at Dalwater, of course, content with a wife, Robert. I am not out to ruin your life but to improve it. Surely, you must see that?”

He softened towards his mother but would not give in completely. “I do not believe Miss Fletcher intends to ruin my life either. She will, instead, take some of the worry of educating and caring for the children off my mind.”

“You mean her presence may allow you to concentrate on your own choices this Season,” the dowager argued.

Robert knew they would never reach an agreement. He waited until

his mother had sipped the last of her hot chocolate, then he solicitously rang the bell. Her lady's maid and Lucy Brown appeared to help his mother to bed, but she was not quite ready to give up their conversation. She shooed the women to the far corner of the room and did not concede to rise.

His mother glared up at him and said: "I still believe you have rushed unwisely into hiring this so-called governess. You must tell Miss Fletcher there will be a trial period. Tell her first thing in the morning. Or, tell the housekeeper to inform the governess for you."

"A trial? I think not," Robert said. Emma could barely look at him due to her gentle and shy nature. How would she fare if she thought the whole household was scrutinizing her every move?

"Think of the young woman, Robert. What if this position is not a good fit for her? Abigail is far above her in beauty, accomplishments, and station. They may detest each other. And Henry will obviously prove too much for her."

“Enough, Mother,” Robert tried to keep his voice low so the servants didn’t hear. “I will not change my mind based on conjecture or foundationless worries about the future.”

“Then, all I ask is the truth.” The dowager rose from her chair slowly and faced her son. “Tell me honestly why you have hired this governess.”

Robert took a deep breath and gave his mother the leeway she deserved. “I hired a governess to guide the children so there would be no need for me to rush into any marital alliances. I thought you would approve of me taking the time to make the right choice.”

“Though you rushed into the decision of employing a governess,” the dowager pointed out.

He opened his mouth to defend Emma again but closed it just as quickly. He could not reveal the extent of his preoccupation with the young woman. As it was, the Dowager was already watching him closely, and he could not stand for her to see his interest. He liked

Emma for being the antithesis of the women in his past, and he figured the attraction would soon pale.

"It is late, Mother. Let's not argue. I am sorry you feel so disrupted. Perhaps a good night's sleep will make the transition easier."

She glared at him for shuffling her off like an older woman, but the dowager finally deigned to be escorted out. He watched her cross his study with all the grace of a queen, and then she returned to poke a finger in his chest.

"You are not broken simply because you made one mistake," she told Robert.

He gritted his teeth but had to ask, "I made a mistake?"

His mother glared. "I've apologized enough for introducing you to Lady Isabel. We were all fooled, Robert, not just you. All society feels the same."

“So, you understand my desire not to rush towards the altar again.” Robert took his mother’s arm and escorted her to the door of his study. “Therefore, you understand why the governess is a welcome addition to our household.”

He spoke loudly, so the housekeeper and the lady’s maid were sure to hear. The duke had declared the new governess was welcome. He had also ruined his mother’s last chance to remind him that her grandchildren needed a mother.

He could see in the lift of her chin that the dowager had not given up. Tonight, though, he was free to go to escape to his dreams uncontested … and, as yet, unencumbered by the looming Season.

Chapter Nine

In the early morning, Emma woke refreshed. She stretched and felt none of the stiffness left over from her travels. Bright sunlight was streaming into her room, and Emma opened her eyes with a smile.

At first, the sight of the rich, gathered material of the bed canopy made her smile widen further, and then Emma remembered. She sat upright in an instant, the stiffness back in her shoulders as she glanced around her elegantly appointed room at Dalwater Manor.

How could she possibly deserve such good fortune? Not by laying about in bed until all hours of the morning, certainly. Emma flung back the covers and gasped when her bare toes touched a thick, warm woven rug. At the vicarage, the room she had shared with Elizabeth only had a knobby rag rug. If only her sister was here to feel such luxury!

Emma went automatically to the hearth and laid a small fire. Her bedchamber was sunny and bright, but so large that she shivered in the expanse of it. Oh, how Elizabeth would have giggled at her nervous, fumbling fingers. Her younger sister always stoked the fires at home in Whitehaven and again at the vicarage, and Emma was woefully bad at the task. Her heart ached as the first kindling sticks flickered to life; how was Elizabeth coping with their separation?

If her sister had known her reasons for seeking employment and taking the position of governess so suddenly, she would be upset. Elizabeth saw none of the troubles that could besiege them, and Emma was happy she could keep such worries from her a while longer.

She only hoped that Elizabeth accepted their separation as a natural part of life and not come to view it as some selfish excuse for Emma to move on without her. Certainly, if Elizabeth saw Emma's current bedchamber, she would not believe taking employment to be a sacrifice.

Employment! Emma still could not believe how quickly her fortunes had reversed in just one day. Her generous salary had been set up with a South London bank, giving Elizabeth access to the funds as they accumulated. Emma had not told her yet, but soon Elizabeth would be able to go to the dressmakers and chose a whole new wardrobe. The thought filled Emma with joy and pride.

The joy only faded slightly as Emma rushed to get dressed. Her own choices in apparel were few, and some of her gowns were growing too threadbare to be seen in such a grand household as the duke's. Emma chewed on her bottom lip as she looked at the meager wardrobe before her.

The traveling dress and coat were new, but now she was settled at Dalwater, she doubted there would be much long-distance travel necessary. She had worn her second-best dress to dinner the night before, and even then, she had felt shabby against the splendor of her employer's home. Even the napkins had outdone her outfit!

Emma took a step back and inhaled a long breath, held it, and

finally let it go with a loud sigh. Luckily, she was merely the governess, and, now the initial welcome was over, she would serve the children and appear to be nothing more than an object in the background. Why should she fret about her clothes when she would likely barely leave the school room?

With her focus back firmly in place, Emma selected a serviceable brown dress. She had just done up the last of the buttons when there was a barely perceptible knock on the door. The maid curtsied low and explained she was assigned to help the miss in the mornings.

"But you've already lit the fire!" the young woman exclaimed. She looked at Emma in wonder.

"Of course, I know how to light my own fire," Emma explained. "I'm here to serve as governess to the children; I am not an honored guest."

The maid shook her head. "The housekeeper said for certain I was to help you every morning."

Emma and the maid looked at each other in shy confusion. True, Emma had grown up with servants, but she had never had a lady's maid and wasn't even sure what one did. She'd already lit the fire, made the bed, and dressed for the day.

"I could help pin your hair?" the maid asked in a timid voice. "It is such a lovely auburn color. Here, let me brush it for you."

Emma knew the young maid would not be happy until she had fulfilled some small service. She felt anxious to do the same in her capacity as a governess, so she sat on the tufted bench at the end of her bed and let the maid brush her hair. There were hardly any tangles, and soon the girl's clever fingers had Emma's thick hair twisted and tucked into a graceful chignon.

They both admired the maid's handiwork in the mirror by the door, and Emma smiled until the young woman exited. One more glance in the glass told Emma that her elegant hairstyle made her dress look even plainer. Still, Emma vowed all her earnings would go to

refurbishing Elizabeth's wardrobe first.

Perhaps His Grace would notice she had changed her hair and not see her dress at all?

Emma's jaw dropped at her own audacity. The Duke of Dalwater notice her? What a silly notion! She was deep into a list of all the reasons why their worlds did not overlap when another knock at the door pulled her out of her thoughts.

Lucy Brown stood grinning in the doorway. "Your maid is quite pleased with you, and she's correct about how beautiful your hair looks."

"Thank you, Mrs. Brown, but there is no need for me to have a maid if she could be of better use elsewhere," Emma said.

"Oh, now, don't go exiling the poor girl to dust the south wing. We are not such a busy household; we cannot spare you the bare minimum of consideration. And, Miss Emma, you are to call me Lucy

Brown. Everyone does, including His Grace."

"Thank you, Lucy Brown," Emma said dutifully.

The housekeeper snorted and asked if she could come in. "I'm glad you are an early riser, as I've been waiting to give you this."

Emma watched as the housekeeper swept into her room and laid a beautiful, olive-green dress carefully on her bed. The linen was so fine that it shone, and the eyelet details along the neckline and sleeves were exquisite. She was drawn by its beauty to the bedside and smoothed her fingertips along the hem gently.

"A gift for our pleasing governess," Lucy Brown announced. She tugged at Emma's plain brown sleeve and gave her a sympathetic smile. "One simply cannot serve a fine family while feeling shabby. And, luckily, His Grace understands such things … when they are brought to his attention."

"This was you, wasn't it, Lucy Brown?" Emma could barely blink

back the hot tears in her eyes.

"Now, now, none of that. The duke has requested that you join the family for breakfast, and I simply cannot tell your maid that tears ruined the effect of your hair."

"Or such a fine dress." Emma's voice was barely a whisper. "I cannot accept this."

"You can, you will, and I will help." The housekeeper bustled Emma into the new dress and then stood back to look at her in satisfaction.

"They really want me to join them for breakfast?" Emma squeaked. She could barely look at herself in the mirror; it seemed to her as if some elegant stranger had appeared in her room when she was not looking.

"No need to be so shy, Miss Emma," Lucy Brown upbraided her while she turned her towards the bedchamber door. "You've earned a

position with a fine family, and you already fit the part. Why, dinner was such a success last night, my dear! Now you look every inch the governess of Dalwater and nothing more need be said."

Emma turned to protest. "Surely such a gift from the duke cannot be appropriate! He should hardly notice me; he doesn't notice me!"

Lucy Brown listened to Emma's stammering with a secretive smile, then gave her an impatient sigh. "Whether or not His Grace notices you, the governess of this house will not go running around in brown cotton. Rest assured, he generously suggested the idea of a welcome gift and the decision for it to be a dress was up to me. Nothing untoward in any of that!"

"But, surely, such fine families do not dine regularly with their servants!" Emma cried.

"You may not have a title or an ancient lineage, my dear, but you have a good name. You have obviously had a good upbringing, and no one would ever mistake you for anything but a gentlewoman.

Therefore, you are welcome at the duke's table without a doubt."

Emma could balk at the door no longer. "I suppose it does make sense for me to get to know the children under the supervision of their guardian."

The housekeeper clucked as she ushered Emma into the hallway. "Do try to get rid of your nonsensical modesty, my dear. You are an accomplished gentlewoman, here to impart wisdom and grace. You are not so far below the duke's notice or his generosity. Therefore, you will join the family for breakfast and show our young Lady Abigail what fine social graces look like in action."

Chastised by Lucy Brown's short speech, Emma descended the grand staircase and refused to fidget as they waited at the bottom. It was still early, but sunlight filled the Great Hall, and she could already hear the soft tinkling of silverware in the breakfast room.

Dalwater Manor rose early, resplendent with the sunrise's warmth, and Emma was certain she'd faint from the sheer beauty of it all.

Luckily, Mr. Williams appeared seconds later, and she could have sworn a smile raced across his stern face like sun beams across the dark water. Then, the butler cleared his throat and gave the housekeeper a sharp nod.

"Another early riser, Lucy Brown. I do appreciate a household that cleaves to punctuality," Mr. William intoned.

"High praise indeed." The housekeeper nudged Emma forward with a broad grin. "I believe the family has requested that Miss Emma join them."

The butler gave Emma a shallow bow. "Yes. His Grace asked that the new governess be brought to the breakfast room as soon as she rose. He will be pleased not to be kept waiting."

Emma folded her hands firmly over the pleated waist of her beautiful new dress, squared her shoulders, and followed the butler to face her new position as governess. She noted the entire family was already seated in the sunny breakfast room and braced herself as Mr.

Williams announced her.

All her confidence fled as the company turned to face her. Then, His Grace rose from his chair and came forward to greet her formally. He wore a dove-gray morning coat, cropped at his waist in the front, with long tails behind, which he pushed back as he bowed. The buttery color of the sunrise, a silk cravat wound around a crisp white shirt, and his ash-blond hair curled over the high collar as he dipped his head to the new governess. Emma lowered her eyes only for them to catch on the bright buttons on his flap-front pants, and she prayed she would not blush crimson.

"A very good morning to you, Miss Emma," the Duke of Dalwater greeted her.

Emma curtsied as low as she could, certain that any words she attempted would only embarrass her more. She was certain she had never been greeted so warmly by a gentleman and certainly never so early in the morning! The duke's bright hazel eyes were back on her face, she could feel them, and the sensation made her as skittish as a

spring colt.

He remained standing as Mr. Williams led her past the decadent sideboard and motioned for a footman to fill a plate for her. Overwhelmed by the bright room, the curious and high-quality company surrounding her, and the duke's solicitous patience, Emma gathered a small breakfast and soon made her way to her seat.

"I hope you find Dalwater Manor to your liking?" His Grace actually pulled a chair out for her. And he asked her a direct question!

Emma, wishing desperately to escape further notice, nodded demurely and sat quickly. She relaxed half an inch when he finally returned to his seat, but she felt his gaze on her as she studied her plate.

Did he recognize her?

Her heart stopped as she considered the most likely reason why His

Grace kept looking at her. Perhaps he could not place her as the silly woman who had scattered apples all over the street in front of him. But, now, in the bright morning light, he may have a better chance of remembering her. Oh, how Emma prayed he did not realize it was her!

She imagined his irritation when he recalled the unfortunate roadblock that had kept him from his heroic chase. He had been running down a thieving pick-purse while she had just been rushing carelessly along. Unforgivable! Emma swallowed hard as she remembered how she had ridiculously detained the duke that day. He had every right to be annoyed with her.

She was glad when a footman brought her fragrant tea and she was able to hide her trembling lips behind the edge of the delicate cup. Emma had not ever received much attention from gentlemen. Her father's acquaintances all regarded her as a child, and, after her mother passed, she had never gone out into society to face men her own age.

One curious glance assured her that the Duke of Dalwater was, by all appearances, only a few years her senior. But he had all the gravity of his title and his upbringing to add to his maturity, and she could barely peel her eyes off her napkin!

So, it was a sweet relief when Mister Henry tumbled into the breakfast room, followed by the graceful Lady Abigail. The children did not seem at all surprised or unhappy to find her there. Emma smiled and nodded to them both, and felt some of her awkwardness recede. After all, she was there to concentrate on the children, and she need not worry about the duke's attention any further.

Emma was instantly distracted by the redness she saw around Abigail's bright eyes. Had she been crying during the night?

Unfortunately, the young lady's grandmother did not notice her saddened expression and launched directly into her edicts for the day. "We have much to prepare for, and today is the perfect day to visit the dressmakers. We shall see all the new fashions, ferret out all the best fabric they've been hiding, and then make an appointment for the

seamstresses to come here and make your trousseau, Abigail. Your mother had a terrible disregard for the intricacies of fashion, and I intend to rectify that in you."

"My sister was such a natural beauty that fashion did not impress her much." His Grace tried to add in order to cheer his niece, but the dowager cut him off.

"It is not a mother's duty to encourage natural beauty or the shunning of fashion," she snapped. "Truly, you leave me with even more work to do when you speak like that, Robert. It is quite impossible to be both the matriarch of this family and a substitute mother when we are busy with useless remembrances."

Emma could see the mention of Abigail's mother was not useless, but painful. The dowager saw nothing wrong in the loss of her daughter being shoved aside in favor of the Season. Nothing else mattered but to present Lady Abigail to society and keep pushing her forward into womanhood. Emma knew how frightening it could feel to face the uncertain future without a mother, and her heart went out

to her young charge.

"Perhaps a more useful remembrance could be your mother's favorite color. I'm sure a dress of that shade would suit you immensely," Emma said quietly to Lady Abigail.

"She loved the color of peaches," Abigail replied.

"Peach? Well, we'll see what the current fashions dictate," the dowager announced with a sniff. She noticed the warm glance her granddaughter gave the new governess and was irritated at the distraction. "Whatever the colors, we will begin our search for your wardrobe this morning."

"What about lessons?" Henry asked. His mouth was full of fresh pineapple.

"Perhaps we should begin with proper enunciation?" Emma suggested lightly. "What do you think, Mister Henry, is it better to be heard or understood?"

Henry swallowed and then grinned. “Understood. As I’m sure, you will understand that I have to attend my fencing lessons first. Right, Uncle Robert?”

The duke chuckled. “A worthy attempt, Henry, but it will do you no good. Your lessons with Miss Emma are more important.”

“Lessons? Surely you don’t expect Lady Abigail to do silly sums instead of prepare for her debut.” The dowager laid her spoon down with an air of disgust.

“Is it not more important for a young lady to face the Season with an air of accomplishment rather than a few new frills?” His Grace frowned at his mother. “She has shown a decided aptitude for painting, and I believe Miss Emma’s excellence at drawing will give her work even more depth and perspective.”

“And what suitor will care if her landscapes are to scale?” The dowager glared at her son. “Really, Robert, I am not certain you were

cut out to be a guardian. It may be best if you follow my advice on the raising of children."

Emma's heart ached as Lady Abigail stared at her tea and listened to the argument. On the other hand, Henry was shoving as many delicate, buttered rolls into his mouth as possible. "Perhaps we should start with sums, Mister Henry? What about five take away three?"

The young lord struggled to answer with his mouth full. "Two?"

Emma smiled, praised his correct answer, and then told him: "As in two too many to fit in your mouth."

Lady Abigail laughed, and Emma was relieved to see her spirits rise. Henry liked the joke as well and did not seem too put out that his fencing idea had been dismissed. He grinned at his uncle, who smiled in return at Emma.

"As the children's legal guardian, I believe lessons should come first. That will give Your Grace enough leisure to envision the desired

fashions you will shop for later properly." The duke smiled at his mother over the breakfast table.

The dowager opened her mouth to argue, then shot Emma a glance. She clearly did not want to take the duke to task in front of a stranger but would make her opinion known later. "Perhaps it will give us both enough leisure to discuss our upcoming social calendar."

The duke sighed but nodded. "Yes, Mother, of course. But, first, I must arrange a meeting with Miss Emma myself. We shall discuss the course of the children's education so that it may not be completely eroded by the excitement of the Season."

Both Lady Abigail and Henry looked more excited about having lessons than the social whirl of winter in London, but Emma felt a sharp stab of worry. She had never in her life had a private meeting with a man outside of Mr. Easton at the agency, and she feared her voice and nerves would not be up to the challenge.

"Yes, sir." She squeaked, rising quickly when he bid her to follow

him to his study.

Chapter Ten

Robert hardly dared turn around, as if Miss Emma might disappear like Eurydice behind Orpheus. They traversed the Great Hall in single file, with the children and the dowager watching them curiously. There was nothing amiss in the duke wanting to discuss their education with the governess!

It was merely a business matter, though Robert's heart was beating faster than normal. He told himself it was simply the effect of the governess' obvious nervousness. As if to prove to himself no one could possibly notice his speeding heartbeat, Robert turned and bowed to his mother from across the hall.

Then, he opened both doors of his study wide, and led the demure governess inside. There, he hurried to open the curtains and make the room bright and comfortable. When he finally did turn around, Robert found Emma standing stock still in the center of the room.

He was struck all in an instant at how delicate she appeared. The olive-green of her new linen dress was fresh and light, as was the curve of her neck to her upswept hair. In contrast, the heavy, dark bookshelves, studded leather chairs, and sturdy side furniture all looked so vital. Robert had never noticed how masculine his surroundings were until he saw Miss Emma in their midst.

On the other hand, she appeared like a fragile spring bloom, shivering out of place amongst thick tree trunks. Her light fingers twined together nervously, and the sweet curls on either side of her face trembled. As her green eyes flitted over the manly room, Robert stood helpless, thinking any move he made would feel clunky and overbearing and only serve to upset her nerves more.

“Thank you for your help with the children at breakfast, Miss Emma,” he said as quietly as possible.

She nodded but kept her petal-pink lips pressed tight together.

Robert cautiously turned a large, high-backed chair towards her. “Please, be seated.”

Emma acquiesced with a soft rustling of her skirts. It was difficult for Robert not to notice the way the olive-green dress enhanced the pearl-coloring of her skin. She all but shone in the warm morning light. The auburn of her hair was made redder by the apt color of the dress, and she looked so particularly handsome, he could not help but comment:

“You look very well this morning, Miss Emma. I do hope that Dalwater is agreeable to you?”

Her jewel-toned eyes swept up to his face. “Very agreeable, Your Grace, thank you.”

The glance and the soft reply were enough to make him smile as if it were Christmas morning. She was a shy and pleasing creature, and he quickly covered his reaction lest it shock her. Miss Emma was artless when it came to speaking with men, Robert decided, and he would not

for anything in the world offend such beautiful innocence.

With great regret, he moved away from her and walked around his large mahogany desk. For the first time in years, Robert remembered how intimidating he used to find his father's desk, and he sat down behind it reluctantly.

The impressive piece of furniture separated him from Emma by nearly four feet, and Robert disliked the distance. He was trying to make the new governess feel welcome, not on trial! The duke recalled how many times he had been seated in just that chair and upbraided by his own father.

Unfortunately, he could not rectify the situation without making Miss Emma uncomfortable by his movements, so they sat in an awkward silence for several moments.

So, it was with great relief that they both greeted Lucy Brown. The housekeeper swept in with a tray of hot tea, took one look at them both sitting so stiffly, and deposited her burden on a low table closer

to the soft settee by the fireplace.

"Thank you, Lucy Brown," the duke said. He stood quickly and motioned for Miss Emma to join him over the tea service. "I believe that is all."

"Yes, I believe so, Your Grace." Lucy Brown curtsied, then smiled at them both. "I'm certain Miss Emma can serve the tea with more elegance than my old hands."

Robert watched as Emma's emerald green eyes flashed at Lucy Brown, but luckily, his housekeeper simply smiled back as she sailed out of the room. Back down went the governess's eyes, and Robert wondered just what he could do to get her to look up again. There was a moment when she was as still as a statue, then Emma moved forward and began pouring the tea. He noted how her hands were steady despite her timorous appearance. If only she would relax and look up!

"Not too much sugar for me, Miss Emma," he said politely.

Her cheeks warmed as if just the timber of his voice affected her whole body. The thought gave him pause, and, in the interval, he let her pour too much cream into his cup. Robert had to take the pale tea before he could study her delicate touch any closer.

He then leaned back and studied her openly. No, she wasn't afraid, just shy of her station and unsure of how to act in his company. Robert had seen women stumble all over themselves at the sound of his title, but none with such impeccable etiquette.

The thought occurred to him that they could sit for hours, and Miss Emma Fletcher would not allow herself the audacity of broaching a single topic. She would sit serenely with her eyes downcast and never know how fascinating he found her.

And to think he had knocked this pillar of modesty and grace right onto the hard ground of the road! Robert berated himself for such brutality. Now faced with the angelic aspect of Miss Fletcher as his wards' governess, he felt truly awful for smiling throughout the entire

afternoon after their mishap. In penance, Robert forced himself to sip down the pale tea.

True, the act allowed him to further look at Miss Emma without having to speak. She was a fascinating creature. Each glance seemed to reveal more of her beauty; he had never noticed the shine of her hair before. She wasn't as fragile as he thought, with her clear skin and glowing good health. Thank goodness the fall hadn't caused her any injury.

He longed to ask her what had long been bothering him: had she been hurt but in too much of a hurry to mention it? Robert knew the intimate question would further mortify the new governess, and he had to swallow back all his solicitations before they were said.

At long last, the governess looked up. "Have I added too much cream for your liking, Your Grace?"

Robert rushed to sit forward and assure Miss Emma that his tea was delicious. "No, I'm enjoying it, thank you. How about you? Are you

enjoying Dalwater Manor so far? I do believe my wards have taken quite well to you."

The mention of the children brightened Emma's face. She replied: "I like it here, very much, Your Grace. I'm simply rather uncertain that I fit in as I am."

Robert watched her pick at her dress, then smooth it down nervously. "The dress was a simple welcome gift, Miss Emma, not a suggestion that you need change at all. The Lady Abigail picked it out herself. We merely want you to be comfortable here with us."

She met his eyes and gave him a brisk smile. "Thank you, Your Grace."

True, Robert had persuaded his niece to choose the green dress for Emma. And it had been his suggestion to provide her with something pretty. But no one thought it amiss that he wanted the governess to be well-dressed. If there had to be such a fuss about the exact shade of roses, then why shouldn't the governess be given a suitable

wardrobe?

And the olive-green dress did suit, Miss Emma, very well. She sat poised on the edge of the settee, her shoulders perfectly straight, and Robert thought her a picture of elegance. The governess did not slouch or fidget, and his only complaint was she did not smile at him enough. He thought again to tease her, ever so slightly, and, this time, Robert could not resist the urge.

"That color suits you so well, Miss Emma. What would you say? Is that shade of green more olive or, say, apple?" Robert tipped his head and gave her an innocent smile.

He was rewarded by an alarmed flashing of her emerald-green eyes. Emma looked up at him, then back down to her hands, then hurried to put her teacup back on the tray lest she upset it. Her cheeks blazed crimson, despite her attempt to hide it by tipping her head severely down to study her knotted handkerchief.

Robert was immediately contrite and reached out to console her.

The offered touch was even more outrageous to Miss Emma than his attempt at a shared joke. They were not close acquaintances who could banter back and forth so easily!

"I do apologize, Emma," he began.

She interrupted him: "I am the one who is sorry, Your Grace! To have accosted you so in the street and then expect you to keep me on as governess is, I'm sure, a grievous offense. I beg your forgiveness."

"I'm sure you must have had your reasons for hurrying," he said. He was determined to hear more because now she was gazing directly at him when she spoke. "I recall you said something about being late."

"You recall?" Her eyelashes fluttered in surprise, but then she refocused. "Yes, I was late. I was hurrying to the agency, the same agency you employed to hire me. I had an interview with Mr. Easton there for a governess position."

“For this position?” Robert wondered. He knew the count of the days didn’t quite tally, but he wanted her to explain more.

Emma shook her head and bit back a smile. “No. I was a little late, and I missed that chance.”

Robert chuckled. “You mean our little run-in caused you to lose a job, and that left you available for this position?”

They both sat with that fateful fact for a while. Robert couldn’t help but wonder if the coincidence somehow justified the magnetism he felt towards Emma. Was the universe determined they should be thrown together?

He cleared his throat. “I’m afraid all that means is that I must apologize again, Miss Emma. I certainly did not mean to make you lose employment over my silly stunt in Covent Garden.”

She reached a gloved hand nearer to his leg but immediately withdrew the reconciliatory touch. It hung in the air between them as

she said, “As I recall, you were chasing down a thief who had just stolen the dowager’s reticule. You were acting gallantly, whereas I was merely rushing without looking where I was going.”

Robert laughed again. “Gallantly, is it? Me playing the hero! Oh, no, Miss Emma, you give me far too much credit. It turns out my coachman was much better suited for heroics that day, while all I was good for was knocking down innocent young women.”

“Oh, how embarrassing!” Emma whispered. She pressed her hands to her cheeks.

“Embarrassing for us both.” Robert caught her suspended hand in a light touch. “There, we shall be equals.”

The clumsy words jolted Emma out of her reverie, and she quickly pulled her hand back. “I understand if our previous meeting makes it awkward to keep me in your employ.”

“Nonsense,” Robert announced. “I asked you to meet with me so we

could discuss the areas of study in which you can best serve the children. You are employed to serve them, but as I am not a child who needs supervising, I may continue to treat you as I would any other worthy guest in my home."

He wished so vehemently that Miss Emma would consider them equals, but her obvious shock at the notion plunged her into a deep silence. Finally, she must have decided it was worse for her to offend him by refusing such an honor. Then, Emma sat forward, poured herself more tea, and looked Robert directly in the eyes.

"I believe your nephew would benefit from work on his mathematics," she said.

Robert grinned, thinking of her clever quip to Henry over breakfast. "Yes, sums would do him a world of good. Though I believe he also needs proper exercise and greater attention to improving his eating habits at the table. He tends to overeat when he doesn't know what else to do."

Emma nodded. Then, her expression grew serious. “I must confess that I only draw. I do not paint with any great talent.”

“Paint? Oh, yes, Lady Abigail. Her swirls and strokes can be improved with the right guidance, and I believe learning to sketch will help her discernment,” Robert said.

“A vital skill for a young woman about to debut to society.” Emma looked down at her hands again.

“Not your area of expertise?” Robert found himself somehow delighted to discover that polite society had not yet seen her.

Her blush returned but she soldiered on. “Lucy Brown mentioned that farming was a favorite subject of yours as a child. Perhaps we can begin with horticulture?”

Robert studied her again with an amazing smile. “An excellent suggestion for our future landowners. I am so thankful to have someone to help me decide on the direction of their education.”

Encouraged, Miss Emma began a comprehensive list of her lesson plans. It gave Robert the pause he needed to consider what really made her so fascinating. Emma Fletcher was the only woman he had ever met whom he found entirely likable. Others had often struck him as opportunistic or overbearing, shallow or willfully ignorant, or fussy and impossible to please, like Lady Beatrice. Emma, on the other hand, presented nothing he did not want.

Emma had no coy arts, she knew when her opinion was wanted, and she was quite intelligent on a wide range of topics. In fact, as they sat and discussed education, Robert found he could imagine them having such talks regularly without any feeling of burden.

Could that be a tenet for a successful marriage?

Robert's brief brush with matrimony had made him imagine only the onerous expectations, never the pleasant possibilities. Now, one conversation with the new governess was enough for him to rethink his banishment of the subject.

Still, he did not think the dowager would approve of his sudden change of heart. Robert was aware that his behavior was above reproof, but he was glad when Emma brought his thoughts back to the children.

"May I ask how long it is since Lady Abigail lost her mother?" It was Robert's turn to look up in surprise at her blunt question. Emma was quick to explain: "I saw her at breakfast and wondered if she may have been sad."

"Yes, of course," Robert said. "There was a family tragedy about six months ago."

Emma was too pained to pry anymore, but her concern for Lady Abigail overcame her hesitation. "They lost both parents?"

He commended her for the herculean effort posing such a personal question must have cost her. Her fingers were now fidgeting with her handkerchief, and he was glad to have at least some effect on her. He

cleared his throat, getting her rapt attention, and then spoke.

"Both parents were lost in a tragic carriage accident. No-fault, no blame; just an accident that left two children bereft. The will was only read recently, and your hiring is my very first official act as guardian."

He couldn't tell if Emma's ears reddened at the overly generous amount of personal information he had shared or from his further remarks on their relationship. She was really only comfortable or courageous when it came to discussing the children, and he admired that, no matter the frustration it caused him.

The young woman struggled to decide on the most appropriate way forward and clearly chose a sensible, straightforward approach. "I only ask because the mourning period needed can be hard to gauge. There must be time allowed for it amongst their studies."

Robert nodded at her words while thinking how Miss Emma was truly spectacular when she forgot her prim façade and spoke

passionately about her job. “I agree. Whole-heartedly.”

Satisfied that the awkwardly personal part of their meeting was now over, Emma took a sip of her tea and almost smiled at Robert unbidden. He grinned and, for a moment, relished the idea of overseeing his wards’ education. As a child, Robert himself had wanted for nothing, and his education had been the best money could buy. One conversation with the new governess, and his eyes were wide to the gaps in his knowledge that needed to be filled.

Emma had just set down her teacup when Robert slapped a hand on his knee. “I know! Proper riding lessons. Nothing soothes the soul and aids in mourning better than a good horse. Tomorrow we will visit my friend’s stables. You must come with us, Miss Emma.”

She looked apprehensive. “I have; I have nothing suitable to wear.”

Robert considered her suddenly pale face and knew there was more to overcome there than simply wardrobe deficiencies. “Of course not; riding was not part of the curriculum until now. You were never

expected to have brought riding clothes. They will be provided."

Emma's eyes rounded with absolute horror. "I never meant to imply you should do so! Your Grace, I do not need charity."

"Staff is regularly issued uniforms, and guests would never think twice to accept my offer if the chance of riding came up unexpectedly." Robert rubbed his hands together, excited for the upcoming venture. "Riding has always been Lady Abigail's favorite treat. Now it shall be her exercise and outlet. Same for Henry. It'll be good for him to learn how to care for a horse and really do the work."

He was so pleased with the idea that he took Emma's hand and bowed over it with a flourish. "You will, of course, attend the children tomorrow. And I shall be happy to accompany you on the ride and lend you any assistance that may be needed."

That brought sudden color to Miss Emma's face, and Robert delighted in seeing her out.

Chapter Eleven

Emma decided to skip over the arithmetic problem asking the student to estimate the speed of a galloping horse. Just the thought filled her chest with a heavy, cold fog of dread. She tried to take a few deep breaths to dispel the panic. It helped to concentrate on Henry's lesson. After another moment's deliberation, Emma chose a problem involving perfectly harmless chickens.

"You said the first lesson would be easy, Miss Emma! I thought it'd just be adding and taking away." Henry sailed past the schoolroom's round table and refused to sit down.

"Subtraction is part of it," Emma said.

Henry groaned but eventually came to sit at the table next to Emma. He painstakingly read the question, started to write down one numeral, and then scribbled it out. Emma tried to give him an

encouraging smile, but he scowled at her and threw an elbow on the table to block her view of his work. There were more hesitant scratches, but no actual calculation apparent.

"I don't know where to start!" Henry got up and took another lap around the schoolroom. He was full of breakfast and full of more energy than concentration. But his excellent breeding won out in the end, and the young lord circled back and sat down with a thump.

Emma showed him where to start. Together they worked slowly through the problem, but their success did not cheer Henry up. And when Emma suggested another issue, he looked about, ready to cry.

"What about Abigail?! Why can't you check up on her lessons?" Henry shot his quiet sister an angry look. "She doesn't like doing sums either."

"I know," Emma said, rising. "Why don't you run down to the kitchens and ask Lucy Brown for a few apples. Perhaps while you are there, the cook can speak to you about measuring spoons."

“What are the apples for?” Henry asked, intrigued.

“For a riddle, you will have to answer when you get back,” Emma said. She raised an eyebrow at the young lord and was pleased when he could not resist the game. The upsetting arithmetic lesson was forgotten, and Henry raced out the schoolroom door.

Throughout, Lady Abigail had stood, still as a post, at the easel. The sunlight streamed in behind her, and her face was just as much lost in shadow as she was in her thoughts. Emma lingered over tidying up Henry’s work and then slowly made her way over to look at the young lady’s progress.

The first thing Emma noticed was the washed-out, ethereal colors Abigail had chosen. It gave the mournful impression of something that was fading and brought tears to Emma’s eyes. The subject of the painting only hurt her heart more; a lone woman stood in an overgrown rose garden, her back to the viewer. It made Emma veer to the window and give her emotions time to settle before she spoke

to the artist.

"You use such lovely, light brushstrokes, Lady Abigail. The effect is quite wistful," Emma said at last.

Abigail looked up, surprised. Then she looked at the painting, and her eyes softened. She nodded. "Wistful is a good word for it."

"I wish you were only wistful for going dress shopping with the dowager. That, we could make happen as soon as you are finished." Emma told the young lady.

"No, thank you." Lady Abigail gave a perfect curtsy. "I am glad Uncle Robert puts a high value on lessons."

Emma was certain her young charge was avoiding preparations for the Season, unlike every other young debutante, but it was much easier to discuss painting. "Your focal point is so lovely. And your placement of the rose beds is very balanced."

“I find that painting roses are very calming,” Lady Abigail admitted.

“I see no reason they should not run riot over every inch of the remaining canvas,” Emma said.

“I’d rather do that than go dress shopping,” the young lady confessed softly. “Not that I don’t appreciate Grandmother’s attention and generosity.”

Emma nodded and paused before she spoke. It was important for her charges to know they could tell her anything, but she was also bound to her employers. The dowager already seemed to dislike her presence, and Emma had to be careful not to raise her ire any farther.

“Perhaps you’ll find the fabric of this very color,” she said, finally. “Then you could be reminded of your peaceful painting while you are out and about in the whirl of the Season.”

Lady Abigail sighed. “Do you think it’s peaceful? I mean, after?”

Emma knew she was talking about her mother’s passing, and the soft question squeezed at her heart. “Certainly. You must have felt it in your heart as you painted, or such a peace would not come across so clearly on your canvas.”

There was an almost imperceptible sniffle from Lady Abigail. She stepped back from her painting, blinked her eyes quickly, and then moved forward to start painting once again. Emma let her fill in the bottom corners with riotous bunches of roses and gave her privacy by returning to look out through the sunny window. There she sought some other way to cheer the young lady before her brother returned.

Emma’s eyes sought the horizon far over the outbuildings and gardens. She tried hard not to think of her own mother or the ache such thoughts caused in her heart. Every person had their own grief, and she did not want to intrude with thoughts about her own. So, how could she lift the young lady’s spirits?

“Have you explored the gardens?” she asked Lady Abigail.

“Yes, Henry dragged me all around them a few days after we arrived here.” It did not sound as if she was eager to repeat her younger brother’s whirlwind tour.

“I can imagine he must have raced you through them.”

There was a faint laugh. “All I remember is the overflowing spearmint bed. Henry must have crushed a few leaves as he went past, and the smell was wonderful.”

That was it! Emma suddenly remembered a way to connect roses with happy memories. “Did you know your own Lucy Brown, the housekeeper, is quite good at making tinctures? I’m certain her medicine box must be quite amazing.”

Lady Abigail turned around. “Really? I would like to learn how to capture such wonderful scents.”

Emma smiled. “Your uncle, the duke, allows Lucy Brown to gather roses from the bushes by the front gates and make rosewater. She gave me a vial when I first arrived, and it is divine! Though I do not find many occasions to wear it. Perhaps you would like it? Then the scent of roses might revive you throughout your shopping trip.”

The young lady’s face brightened. “You would make a gift of it to me?”

“Of course! Then, I shall ask Lucy Brown to give us lessons in making such tinctures. By spring, you will be able to blend any lovely scent you want,” Emma told her.

She moved to the door of the schoolroom and Lady Abigail eagerly followed. Emma was almost embarrassed by the splendor of her own bedchamber until she reminded herself that the young lady was used to such luxurious surroundings. She had so few toiletries that the small vial of rose water was easy to find. Lady Abigail took it and sighed happily over the scent.

“How wonderful,” she said. “You mustn’t part with it.”

“It is yours,” Emma assured her. “And the first batch we make together will easily replace it.”

“Then I hope to be an apt student, or else you’ll be wearing sour petals,” Abigail laughed, and Emma joined in.

They returned together to the schoolroom, and Emma was relieved to see Abigail turn her attention to the books rather than returning to her melancholy painting. Together they found a book on plants and learned all about the life cycle and propagation of roses. Emma had never been much of a gardener. Their plot at Whitehaven had been small and covered with hardy perennials which largely took care of themselves, so the subject was new and exciting. Abigail’s mother had obviously loved gardening, but the further information was enough to keep the young lady’s mind on happier subjects.

“Do you think I sent your brother too far on his errand?” Emma

asked after they had finished perusing the book together.

Lady Abigail grinned and shook her head. “No. A good run is exactly what Henry needs if he’s going to have any hope of studying.”

“He doesn’t seem to like arithmetic much,” Emma noted.

Her young charge’s face turned serious again. “His first tutors were much too indulgent, so Henry was late learning his numbers.”

“So, it has always been a struggle?”

“No. He is very bright, it’s just. . .” Abigail seemed reluctant to share another sad memory, but sighed heavily and said: “He always saved his numbers for last because my father loved those lessons the best.”

Emma nodded, softly encouraging Lady Abigail to speak of her father. “Henry simply wanted the best teacher. Very wise.”

Lady Abigail's sad countenance was interrupted by a quick smile. "Don't let Henry hear you call him wise, or we'll never hear the end of it."

"Perhaps he doesn't think I am a suitable tutor for his arithmetic?" Emma asked.

"No, of course not," Lady Abigail was kind enough to assure her. "He has just gotten into the habit of avoiding those particular lessons, and it is hard for him to concentrate. A good run out to the kitchens and back is just what he needs."

"Our lessons are flexible, my lady. If Mister Henry is unhappy, we can easily switch to something else for the morning lessons."

Lady Abigail shook her head. "It would be worse in the evening. Our father used to invite Henry into his study in the evenings, and they would stay there late together working on his sums. I remember because I would always be sent to remind them of the time, and I

would find them, heads together, at Father's big desk."

The loving memory and the realization of what the children had lost were too much for Emma. She rushed to the window to try to hide her tears, but she was not quick enough. Lady Abigail joined her in the sunshine and studied her face with worry.

"I'm sorry, my lady. I will have better control of my emotions before your brother returns," Emma told her.

"You have either a very generous heart or a similar sadness within it," Lady Abigail intuited.

Emma shook her head. "A generous heart would never add to your grief with extra tears. I do apologize, my lady."

Lady Abigail laid a soft hand on Emma's arm. "No, please, don't hide your tears. You have no idea what a relief it is actually to speak of grief! All these long months and our parents are hardly ever mentioned."

“No one wishes to bring you pain, my lady.”

“But that means the happy memories have been silent as well,” Lady Abigail said. Her own bright eyes were awash with tears. “The dowager only invokes my mother when she wishes to discuss my potential matches. She forgets how little my mother cared for dresses and balls and such.”

Emma gave her a tearful smile and could not help but admit: “My mother was the same. And when she was gone, it was years before my father spoke her name again.”

Lady Abigail’s hand pressed a little harder on Emma’s arm. “You lost your mother too?”

“Oh, my lady, you do not need my grief as well!”

“No, please! I have no one else to share such things with, and I am

so tired of being alone in my mourning. Please, tell me."

Emma laid a hand over Abigail's. "I was fifteen years old when my mother passed. She had been very ill, and I attended her wants myself. The pain of it has lessened, but I still remember holding her hand as she died."

"Oh, Emma! I do not know which is worse: my mother left one day and never returned, but you were there holding your mother's hand."

"Either way, my lady, I know our mothers are still with us, and they would want our hearts full of their love and our heads filled with happy memories," Emma told her.

Tears flowed freely now between the two women, and they both separated to fumble for their handkerchiefs. At that moment, Henry burst back through the door to the schoolroom. He skidded to a stop in the center of the room and dropped two bright, red apples. They rolled across the floor and stopped at the hem of Emma's dress. She dabbed at her eyes one last time, tucked her handkerchief away, and

leaned down to pick them up.

"Thank you, Mister Henry," she said.

Her voice must have wavered enough that the young boy noticed because his eyes flew to her face, widened in horror, and then looked to his sister. "You're both crying?" he asked, aghast.

"Don't be ridiculous, Henry. We were just waiting for you," Lady Abigail told her younger brother with only a slight sniff.

He narrowed his eyes and studied his sister's face. "Then why do your eyes look all red and puffy."

"Now, really, Mister Henry. Good etiquette means you never discuss another's looks, especially not in such unflattering terms," Emma scolded him.

The young boy frowned at them both. "You sent me away so you

could talk about me, and now you've both been crying."

Lady Abigail took the apples from Emma and put them on the table. "Of course, he assumes we've been talking about him."

"All is well, Mister Henry. Nothing to worry about," Emma said.

Henry looked from his sister's face to the governess's and decided he was not being told the whole truth. The stomp of his foot emphasized the look of hurt and indignation on his face. "Then what were you talking about?"

Emma looked to Lady Abigail whose eyes had strayed to the painting of her mother. For a moment, the young lady was far away, back in her memories and her grief, then Lady Abigail looked at Emma. The two women exchanged a look of sympathy and sadness that the young boy did not miss.

"We discussed my painting," Lady Abigail said.

“And your lessons.” Emma intended to change the subject and spare the young lady anymore sadness, but Henry took her meaning the wrong way.

“I swear I’ll do better with my arithmetic. I will! Please, don’t cry. I promise to study harder,” he exclaimed.

Lady Abigail burst out laughing and rushed across the room to embrace her brother. “Oh, no, my dear. That wasn’t it at all. You are doing well with your lessons, and I am so proud of you.”

“I see great promise in you, Mister Henry. Soon you will outpace my own learning, I am certain,” Emma reassured him.

He sniffled at her from his sister’s arms. “Then why did you send me to the kitchens?

“Nothing helps the mind as a good run after a lesson,” Emma said.

Lady Abigail kissed the top of her brother's head and finally released him from the embrace. "And what are the apples for?" she asked.

"Ah," Emma hesitated, but she couldn't resist the openly curious faces of her charges. She had shared enough with Lady Abigail to feel they could grow close, and she knew that only honesty would help their relationship get stronger. "The apples are actually to help me with something. I'd like us to take them to the stables so we can meet your uncle's horses."

"Have you never met a horse before?" Henry was incredulous.

Emma shook her head, feeling shy. "Yes, though I was very young and it was not the most pleasant of experiences."

She headed for the door, and the children followed, peppering her with questions:

“Did it bite you?” Henry asked.

“No, but they do have large teeth, don’t they.” Emma led the way down to the grand staircase.

“But, did it scare you very badly?” the boy asked.

Lady Abigail scolded him: “Henry! Don’t ask such questions. We’ll just show Miss Emma that there is nothing to be afraid of. Horses do like apples, and they’re sure to be friendly once they see them.”

Henry stopped on the stairs and gave both women an ominous look. “Except for Uncle Robert’s horse. No one is to give him treats unless it is the duke.”

Lady Abigail tugged him onward. They crossed the Great Hall and down the corridor to the south wing. From there, they could exit the doors closest to the stables and only have a short jaunt across the sweeping south lawns. Emma kept her stride quick in the hopes the children would soon tire of their questions.

“But, you have ridden before, haven’t you?” Lady Abigail asked.

“Yes,” Emma admitted. “Though it is not my favorite activity. And horseback riding was not part of my regular life in Whitehaven.”

“I learned to ride when I was five years old,” Henry boasted.

“And fell on your face when you were six,” Lady Abigail teased.

Henry scowled at her, then raised his chin. “You shouldn’t scare the governess like that.”

Emma laughed and took Henry’s arm. “Thank you, kind sir. Now, will you be so good as to show me how to feed a horse an apple?”

Luckily for Emma, it was a short visit to the stables. Lady Abigail was ushered off to meet the dowager soon after, and Henry was released from his lessons for the day. Emma watched him race off

towards the gardens and the wooded acres beyond and envied his freedom. Though, on her return to Dalwater Manor, she could not help but feel particularly blessed.

Her new charges were wonderful, and her new home was undeniably magnificent. With that in mind, Emma concentrated on writing up a list of lesson plans in case the duke enquired further. If any place, and people, deserved a dedicated governess, it was Dalwater Manor, and Emma was honored to do the work.

She was still poring over the books in the schoolroom and updating her lesson list when Lucy Brown found her later. "You've been requested to appear at dinner again, my dear," the housekeeper told her.

Emma looked at the clock and realized she didn't have time to question the overly generous offer, and she only had enough time to dress. "Thank you, Lucy Brown. But, first, may I ask a favor for myself and Lady Abigail?"

“Of course,” Lucy Brown said, intrigued.

“I gave Lady Abigail the rose water you gifted me, in order to cheer her up. Its scent is so wonderful, we were hoping to add tincture-making to our lesson plans,” Emma told her.

Lucy Brown beamed. “How wonderful, my dear. We will make time for it, though I’m certain the Season will soon be taking over much of Lady Abigail’s time.”

The housekeeper was correct. As soon as Emma joined the family for dinner, the dowager launched into another grand speech about the Season and their busy schedule. She dismissed the children’s talk of their lessons, gave Emma an arch look, and then turned to her son. Emma’s cheeks reddened as she realized the duke was looking at her, but the dowager demanded everyone’s attention.

“You’ll thank me now, Robert, for my close association with Almack House. The patronesses are delighted to hear of our intention to join the Season,” The Dowager said.

“The patronesses?” Lady Abigail asked solicitously.

“Yes, my dear. They are a select committee of great influence, the absolute leaders of the *ton*. You will be certain to impress them with your debut,” the dowager told her in lofty tones. “I have cultivated such a good connection with Almack House that your success is all but ensured.”

Emma was happy for her young charge, though, when she dared glance up again, she saw Lady Abigail’s face had fallen back into quiet sadness. It would take more than rose water to help the young woman through her debut, and Emma vowed to come to her aid in whatever way possible she could.

Chapter Twelve

Robert was the first at breakfast, much to the surprise of Lucy Brown and Mr. Williams. Normally, the dowager presided over the table at least fifteen minutes before anyone else in the house entered the breakfast room. Today, though, it seemed the duke was up with the sunrise and looked just as bright. He grinned at his astonished staff and further confused them with a simple request:

"Please see that the children join us as soon as possible," he told the housekeeper.

Lucy Brown curtsied low, shot the butler a look, and then went to summon the children. Mr. Williams, on the other hand, decided his dignity required him to conduct himself as if he had not noticed anything wrong. He called in the footmen with the hot food and made sure His Grace's coffee was brought in as soon as possible. The only time his placid expression changed was when the duke started humming happily to himself.

“Your Grace? Is anything, ah, the matter?” Mr. Williams asked.

“Quite the opposite, Williams. It’s a fine day, and I have a fine surprise for my wards,” Robert said.

The duke was finding it quite hard not to grin and rub his hands together in anticipation. He could already imagine the joy on Henry’s face when he announced the day’s plan, and Robert was sure he’d see Lady Abigail smile as well. Her smiles were pale and rare, and Miss Emma’s arrival brought her happiness back. The thought of Emma and her inclusion in the day’s outing made him fight the urge to whistle a tune.

“Why, Robert. What brings you to the table so early?” The dowager swept into the room with the housekeeper at her heels. “I’d like to think you are finally showing an interest in our upcoming social engagements. Would you like to know what I have planned for today?”

Robert ignored his mother's lofty tone and kept an eye on the door. He had discovered that one of the joys of guardianship was keeping a secret he knew would delight his wards. The anticipation of delivering the surprise was almost too good for him to contain. Happily, he soon heard Henry's rambunctious trot, and the boy, followed by his sister, burst into the breakfast room.

"So early?" The dowager was clearly displeased to have her quiet morning routine upset. She frowned at the children but finally gave them the nod to enter and sit down.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace." Lucy Brown curtsied and gave Mr. Williams another astonished look. "His Grace asked they be brought down."

Henry beamed at his uncle as he took hold of a giant pastry. "I was ready. I'm hungry!"

"Well, eat up then," Robert told him with a wide smile. "We've got a busy morning, and you'll need your stomach full."

“You’ve planned a busy morning for us?” Lady Abigail looked at her uncle hopefully. She then glanced at the dowager and dropped her gaze. Lately, her grandmother had been trying to schedule every second of the young lady’s life with preparations for her debut.

“I did indeed.” He sat back and took another sip of his coffee, his eyes twinkling at everyone over the rim of his cup.

“Do we have to guess?” Henry asked eagerly.

“Oh, yes, what fun!” Lady Abigail seconded the idea.

Robert sat up and nodded. “Excellent idea. Go ahead and try to guess what your fun for the morning shall be.”

Henry leapt from his seat in order to go first. “Fishing?”

“No, but there will be animals,” Robert replied.

Lady Abigail sat forward eagerly. “Has the gardener’s dog had her puppies at last?”

“No, though I will make sure you are the first to know when they

arrive."

The Dowager refused to enjoy the lively looks on the children's faces or the smile on her son's lips. "Oh, really, Robert. What is all this nonsense?"

"Are you sure you don't want to guess, Mother?" Robert asked her.

"Yes, please, do guess, Grandmother. You are cleverer than us, for certain," Henry cried.

The dowager only softened slightly at the compliment from her grandson. "Just go ahead and make your announcement, Robert. Some of us do not have all morning to play such silly games."

"You're right," Robert said. "Some of us will be too busy … riding."

"Horses?" Henry cried. "All of us?"

Robert clapped his hands, happy to see his announcement had the desired effect. Henry could not sit down for excitement, and Abigail's eyes were bright above her excited smile. "Yes, all of us. My friend,

the Duke of Elsby, has an excellent stable, and he is more than happy to host us for the whole morning."

"How wonderful!" Lady Abigail cried, then checked herself. She caught Henry before he attempted to gallop around the table and directed him back to his plate. "Come, Henry, let us eat so we can ride for longer without having to stop."

The Dowager satisfied that the children were focused elsewhere, turned to her son with a sharp look of reproof. "Really, Robert, you've done a terrible disservice to the Duke of Elsby by making plans you cannot keep. I've already promised our morning to the Duke and Duchess of Irrisoll."

"I was not aware of any such plans, but I will make sure to send my deepest regrets," Robert said. He noticed how Abigail's head bent lower as she overheard her grandmother. Henry, luckily, was too busy eating to notice his plans were in jeopardy.

"That simply will not do, Robert. And, I would think, you of all

people would want to be at Irrisoll," the dowager said.

"I? What business do I have at Irrisoll?" Robert asked. "Surely nothing that could keep me from a promise I've made to my wards."

The dowager gave her son an impatient sigh. "Perhaps it is not the duke and duchess that you should think of. I'm certain Irrisoll has other pleasant inducements. Can you not think of a single one?"

Robert frowned at his mother and refused to answer right away. He did not like how immediately she sought to reschedule the children's joy for her own ambitions. Finally, he rose to pour himself another cup of hot coffee and said, as evenly as possible, "I do hope you are not referring to the Lady Beatrice."

"Of course, I am!" Since she had left her cane in the corner, the dowager rapped at the table with her knuckles. "Surely such an accomplished and beautiful lady is worth giving up a morning of being jostled around on some beast."

“I’m certain that the Duke of Elsby would be hurt to hear you refer to his prize horses in such a manner,” Robert said.

“Oh, nonsense,” the dowager sniffed. “Your friend Theo has a great deal more sense than you and, if you’re not careful, that marriage-minded duke may take your place in Lady Beatrice’s affections.”

Robert laughed. “Again, I think Theo would be hurt to hear you doubt his discernment in such a manner!”

The dowager rapped the table again, causing Henry to drop his spoon and notice the argument going on. “We simply cannot be engaged at two places at once.”

“You are quite correct, Mother.” Robert took a deep breath to calm his irritation and then gave the dowager his sweetest smile. “And I would never ask you to break your word. Please, Mother, enjoy your morning at Irrisoll and give them all my best.”

“You insist on going horseback riding?” The dowager’s mouth

worked with anger, and she had to put her teacup down without taking a sip.

"I insist on keeping to the plans I've made, and I suggest you do the same." The challenging look in his eyes sharpened robert's smile.

His mother refused to let the subject drop. She surveyed the table and laid eyes on poor Lady Abigail. "Very well. If you do not accompany me, I shall expect Abigail to be my companion. As it was, the children could have had the whole morning free, but, now that you are not available to escort me, I shall have to depend on my granddaughter."

Lady Abigail did not look up from her plate except to hush Henry's outraged cry. The young woman was back to looking pale and wan, but her grandmother took no notice. Robert, on the other hand, was enraged to see the joy he had so happily anticipated taken out of his niece's eyes.

"Perhaps the children would be so good as to let us discuss our plans

in private," he said.

Lady Abigail rushed from the breakfast room, but Robert was able to catch Henry and whisper, "Never fear. We shall prevail."

He watched the young boy race to reassure his sister, and then Robert turned on his mother once again. "Could you not see their excitement? Surely that is what I am supposed to provide as guardian."

The dowager frowned. "Children never know what is best for them."

Robert could not miss her meaning and he scowled. "Let your grown son be clear then, Mother: I will not be entangled in your marriage schemes. I will not forego my guardianship duties in order to submit to another of your contrived meetings."

"Do not dare to use your sister's children as an excuse." The dowager looked down her thin nose at her son. "It is strange that you

have so suddenly taken such an interest in their welfare."

"Yes! As soon as I was named their guardian, I took their welfare to be my highest priority," Robert said. "What offense can it be for me to enjoy my duties, and even find some joy in them?"

"There are more important things than horseback riding, Robert. You are the one who must show them their priorities," the dowager said.

"Fresh air, exercise, and the company of a generous friend. I believe my priorities for the children are far sounder than a morning spent scheming up a marriage that will never take place." Robert stood up.

The dowager pushed back her chair,and a footman rushed to bring over her cane. She then rapped it hard on the ground. "Never? I think you will find the fun and games of being a guardian will wear out soon. Then you will wish for a wife to share your burden."

Robert was seething but he still offered his mother his arm. "I do

not wish to argue anymore, Mother. Let us enjoy our different mornings and continue our disagreements later."

She sniffed haughtily but did not speak against him any longer. Instead, they walked together into the Great Hall and found the children waiting, wide-eyed, at the base of the stairs. Henry could barely contain himself, but his sister had obviously cautioned him to behave. He jumped from one foot to another, gazing at his grandmother and guardian in agony.

"I won't go riding if Abigail can't come!" Henry finally burst forth.

The dowager stiffened but, at long last, gave up with a sigh. "Oh, for goodness sake, take them both riding. Lady Abigail certainly could do with some color in her cheeks."

Henry gave a great whoop of joy and cried out. "Did you hear, Miss Emma? We are going horseback riding!"

Robert glanced up the staircase and almost forgot all about the

morning's excitements and arguments. The new governess hesitated on the landing, accidentally caught in a patch of golden morning light. Her auburn hair was all alight around her face, and he found himself arrested mid-stride.

The dowager pulled her arm impatiently from the crook of Robert's elbow and rapped her cane again. "You are taking the governess as well?"

"Yes." Robert pulled his eyes from Emma and faced his mother's displeasure. "The Lady Abigail should have a chaperone, and there is no more fitting choice besides yourself."

"Well, seeing as she is already dressed for riding, I shall continue with my plans." The dowager shot her son one more disapproving look and then sniffed. "Good day to you all."

The governess waited, frozen, until the dowager had left and then continued her descent down the grand staircase. Robert's smile followed her graceful movements, and he found himself even happier

than he had been while waiting to surprise the children. Miss Emma was dressed in the riding habit he had requested.

The dress was of the deepest sapphire-blue velvet with a matching tailored coat. She held both the matching hat and gloves in her hands, and he saw her fingers were curled tightly around them.

"I do apologize, Miss Emma. My mother and I had a scheduling conflict, but all is well now, and our plans to go riding are still in place," he told her.

"When do we leave?" Henry was jumping up and down with excitement.

Robert grinned. "As soon as you and your sister are properly dressed. Miss Emma is not the only one to be gifted a new riding habit today."

The children raced upstairs to change, and, once they were gone, Robert extended his hand to Emma. She shrank back from his gallant

gesture and kept both hands tightly on her hat and gloves, prim and proper as always. Part of Robert was frustrated at a distance she insisted upon, but he was glad of it when he heard his mother approaching again.

"Now, really, Robert. I must point out that you ask too much of your friend to include the governess in your riding party. As her guardian, you are a more than adequate chaperone, and there is no need for the girl to go with you," the dowager announced.

The hand Robert had extended to Emma now balled into a fist. He felt rather than saw the governess shrink back a step as his mother shot her a stern look. "What possible reason could you have against her going? Theo already has a horse prepared for Abigail's chaperone, and, you know, it was no trouble to him at all."

"I'm happy to stay back, Your Grace," Emma told them both with a neat curtsy.

He turned and studied her face. Emma had looked nervous enough

on the stairs, and he expected to see her petrified by his mother's disapproval. Instead, the governess looked almost relieved. Was it his company she wished to avoid or something else?

"I assure you, Mother, and you, Miss Emma, there is no impediment to us all enjoying a simple morning ride." He watched the nervous pallor return to the governess's cheeks and was even more determined to discover the cause of it during their morning together. "My friend has horses to spare, and I believe it is important for the children to have their governess along to guide their manners and learning."

"At least you concede that you still need expert advice when it comes to your wards," the dowager said. "Now, if you would only take my advice on your own choices."

Robert drew himself to his full height, done with the dowager's attempts to mar his happy plans. "As a man who has reached my majority, and as the current Duke of Dalwater, I believe my choices are final. Whatever opinions you may have of them, Mother can wait until we return."

He was greatly relieved when the children bounded back down the stairs and his mother finally took her to leave. Once they were ensconced in his carriage and on their way to Elsby, Robert could finally recover his good spirits. He was curious about the governess's less than enthusiastic expression and often glanced in her direction to wonder at it. She was a very pleasing sight, with her new riding hat balanced jauntily over her auburn hair, and the vision made him smile at everyone.

Lady Abigail was also smiling brightly, and it was she who finally broke the governess from her quietude. "You will see, Miss Emma, Elsby has the most excellent stables. Simply the most divine horses!"

Robert watched as Emma's eyes rose to study his niece. She seemed to see and hear more in the girl's expression than he noticed, and he wondered at her sudden smile.

"I am glad this Elsby is such a delightful place," Emma said.

Robert glanced out of the window to hide his own grin. The young governess had no idea they were talking about the Duke of Elsby, and he was very curious to see how she would react to meeting another peer. Was Miss Emma wary of all titled gentlemen, or was it himself in particular who made her so standoffish?

"Oh, you'll see! Elsby is a dear friend and so generous. I'm not at all surprised he has invited us all to ride." Lady Abigail smiled with happy anticipation.

Robert stole another glance at the governess. The sapphire blue of her riding habit brought out the bright jewel tones of her green eyes, and he was very pleased with it. He knew his mother had doubted his motives for giving an employee such a gift, but Robert reminded himself it was only proper the governess should be outfitted correctly. He couldn't very well have his wards followed by an improperly dressed servant! Though, with Emma's bright eyes and the stunning figure she cut in her new clothes, it hardly seemed right to call her a servant. No, it was obvious she was a gentlewoman, and he looked forward to introducing her to Theo.

The Duke of Elsby was good enough to meet them on the driveway of his fine estate, and he eagerly gave the ladies a hand down from the carriage.

"Good morning to you all!" Theo beamed. "Welcome. Lady Abigail, I am so pleased to see you again, and Mister Henry, you are really much taller than the last time we met."

"Ah, Your Grace," Robert said with a grin. "Please let me introduce Miss Emma Fletcher, the children's governess."

"Wonderful to meet you, Miss Emma. I am so glad you were able to join our party this morning." Theo said with a gallant bow.

Robert could have crowed with laughter. The prim governess had just realized his 'friend' was a duke as well, and all she could do was return his bow with an unsteady curtsy. He stepped forward to offer Emma his arm, and she had no recourse but to take it. Theo was escorting Abigail towards the stables, with Henry racing ahead. As

part of the party, so generously welcomed by their host, Emma couldn't very well disdain Robert and walk behind them. So, he was able to stroll arm and arm with her along the path to the stables.

Perhaps Emma's glacial propriety would have to thaw now she realized Robert wasn't the only member of the peerage who deigned to treat her respectfully. She would simply have to accept the fact that she was gentlewoman, and not as far below his notice as she had previously thought. Finally, they would be able to meet as friends instead of strangers!

The delightful thought slowed his steps, and Robert excused his delay by pointing out all the wonderful vistas Elsby's estate had to offer. By the time they approached the stables, the young governess's arm was not quite as stiff as it had been. She'd even answered an inquiry or two. Robert still had yet to see her emerald eyes meet his, but he was certain that, by the end of the morning, Miss Emma Fletcher would soften towards him. He then vowed to make her smile and wondered if he dared hope he could make her laugh.

His nephew beat him to both conquests as he raced back to them and breathlessly urged them to hurry. “Come on, Uncle, Miss Emma. Aren’t you excited to see the horses?”

“Certainly,” Robert answered, sure that he would enjoy nothing more than riding with such a fine party on such a beautiful day.

Chapter Thirteen

Emma was glad for the rich texture of the duke's coat under her hand; he could not feel the damp nervousness of her touch. Every step they took brought her closer to the stables and closer to having to reveal her utter discomfort around the huge animals.

The walk itself was full of beautiful distractions, like the view across a small lake to Elsby's gothic folly, but every time Emma turned her attentions to such things all she could think about was the company surrounding her.

How could she, a simple governess from Whitehaven, be strolling through a grand estate arm in arm with the Duke of Dalwater!

"Miss Emma, are you at all fond of strawberries? My greenhouse gardener has an excellent crop just turned red," the Duke of Elsby turned to tell her.

He waited with such an open expression of interest that Emma was forced to answer him in kind. “Strawberries so late in the season is a treat indeed,” she said.

“I’ll show you the greenhouses on our way back to the house then.” The Duke of Elsby gave Abigail a wide smile, and they continued to lead the way.

Her escort leaned closer and remarked: “Ah, but you never said if you actually like strawberries.”

Emma hesitated but realized she had no reason to demur. If both dukes condescended to speak with her as an equal, who was she to rebuff their kindness? “They are delicious, but they do stain,” she admitted.

The Duke of Dalwater laughed. He then patted his breast pocket and told her, “Then you shall have my handkerchief in case of a mess.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she replied.

Her escort sighed and then called up ahead. “Your Grace? How should our governess address us both today? Will it be an unending litany of titles and polite referrals, or shall we have real names for a day?”

The Duke of Elsby turned again and grinned at his friend. He then glanced at pretty Lady Abigail on his arm and said: “I would prefer to be called Theo if the ladies find no offense.”

Emma opened her mouth to protest but Lady Abigail solved the problem with an easy smile: “We shall say whatever seems fitting for the moment.”

Lady Abigail’s escort gave a gallant nod and continued to show her the way to the stables. Emma decided it was better for her to concentrate on the children than to think about two dukes. And she was proud of Lady Abigail’s behavior. The young lady was an

excellent example of easy grace, which eluded many of those from the stiff upper circles.

"If anyone cares for my opinion, I'd prefer to be called Robert," her escort said only loud enough for her to hear.

Emma gave him a polite, though almost imperceptible nod. "To avoid confusion, of course."

He chuckled again, a reaction Emma felt in her arm as well as heard. How could Lady Abigail walk so close to a man and not feel overwhelmed? Emma knew it was silly, but the closeness, plus the Duke of Dalwater's height, the rich texture of his coat, and the occasional hints of his cologne, were enough to make her dizzy. She was now keenly aware of the duke's strength and how it was supporting her along the path. Emma could not remember a time when a man of any station had escorted her with such intoxicating confidence.

Reminding herself again of her purpose, Emma concentrated on her

charges. Henry was already at the stables and deep in a lively discussion with the stable hands waiting there. Lady Abigail walked easily next to the Duke of Elsby, and the two discussed his estate with some animation. Clearly, the young lady had met the duke before, he was a dear friend of her guardian, and it was wonderful to see her smiling.

Indeed, Lady Abigail was frequently smiling, her animated face lifted to the duke's. Emma observed how the young lady's eyes lingered on her escort's face more than the vistas he pointed out. At one point, along the path's curve, Lady Abigail brought her other hand to rest atop his arm as well. Emma could not help but smile to herself; her young charge was cultivating quite an esteem for the Duke of Elsby.

Emma wondered if her guardian perceived the bloom as well, but when she glanced up at the Duke of Dalwater, he was looking at her, and she quickly turned her eyes to the stables. Oh, the horses! Henry was helping to lead them out and the gleaming beasts were clattering their hoofs and tossing their heads.

“Beautiful, are they not?” The Duke of Dalwater asked. “My dear friend has always had a soft spot for creatures, but he has quite outdone himself with these fine beasts.”

“I suppose they are quite well trained?” Emma asked.

The duke looked down and smiled at her again. “I’m certain their manners will please even you, Miss Emma.”

Before she could stop herself, Emma asked: “Am I really so stiff?”

“No, not stiff, but prim. Pleasing … but very prim.”

Emma was not happy with his description of her, but the feeling only served to make her even more prim. She struggled to find some of Lady Abigail’s graceful ease. “I am required to be a proper example, Your Grace. Surely that is not a situation to mock.”

“Mock you?” The duke stopped on the path. “That was never my intention, Miss Emma. I simply want to encourage you to relax. Please, you are among friends for the morning. Yes, you have your duties to the children, but I think they will benefit from being released from such formal pressures for an hour or two. Am I wrong in my thoughts as a guardian?”

“No, Your Grace. I mean, Robert. You are quite right.” Emma looked up into his face and found herself smiling … just like Lady Abigail.

Chapter Fourteen

Emma adjusted quite easily to the new schedule at Dalwater, which was quite contrary to what she had thought would happen. She had spent just two weeks doing her new job, and she already felt as though it was something she had done every day of her life. She was even getting over her fear of horses and riding more confidently.

But back in the schoolroom, she had her work cut out for her, teaching Henry about adding and subtracting his numbers.

“It certainly isn't as hard as it seemed the first day,” Henry said with a glint in his eyes, after failing to answer any of the five sums she had given him correctly.

“Is that why you decided not to get any of them, right?” Emma asked, trying to keep the amusement she felt out of her voice.

“Of course not! It isn't my fault I didn't get them right,” he said and shrugged. Emma never ceased to be amazed at the little man’s bravado.

“So, it is mine, then?” she asked, and he smiled.

“No, it isn't. It's the fault of the sums. They all look easy enough to start with, only they turn out to be so complicated,” he concluded with a mischievous look in his eyes.

“I think we shall have to do them all over again until you can get all five of them correct. I shan’t have you shifting the blame onto the innocent sums when all you have to do is solve them.”

“Alright, then,” Henry responded, but the look on his face said otherwise. However, Emma wasn't ready to let him off too easily. It was her job to teach him, after all.

“You told me just a few days ago that if we put together eight apples and another eight apples, we would have sixteen apples,” Henry said,

a confused look on his face and Emma wondered whether to soften her features.

“Yes, I did,” she responded promptly.

“Then why do ten apples and six apples make sixteen again?” he asked, clearly baffled. Emma tried not to smile so as not to make him feel bad. She then explained it all over again.

They had done the sums repeatedly, and by the time Henry eventually got four out of five correct, the boy looked as exhausted as if he had spent the day digging a well, not to mention in a foul mood.

Emma decided it was best to continue with the mathematics another time, and so she left him to play. It was the least she could do to try to brighten his mood after all.

She would be free all afternoon and decided not to wallow in boredom for the rest of the day.

“Ah, there you are, just the right company I've been searching for,” Lady Abigail said as she strolled into the schoolroom looking elegant.

“Isn't it such a bright afternoon?” Emma responded and smiled brightly at her charge, smoothed her skirts and sitting in an opposite chair.

“Of course, Miss Emma. An afternoon bright and lovely enough to enjoy reading poems, I daresay,” Abigail said with a bright twinkling in her eyes.

“You love poems too? They lift my spirits as well,” Emma said, and they both giggled like schoolgirls.

"Oh, it is your lucky day, then, Miss Emma, because I have brought you some of the poetry books my mother gave me years ago.”

Emma had always had an artistic and creative side to herself,

including a poetic side. She would read poems to her mother before she slept … when she was still healthy.

The thought almost brought tears to her eyes. How much she missed her mother!

"*I wandered through every chartered street, Near where the chartered Thames does flow, in every face I meet, Marks of weakness, marks of love.*" Lady Abigail read aloud the first stanza of William Blake's famous *London Poem* from a fragile-looking book she held carefully in her hands. Emma could practically see the Duke of Elsby imprinted on the girl's mind as she read out the words.

"What are you thinking about, Miss Emma?" Lady Abigail asked, still smiling, and passing the book to Emma.

"Oh, I was simply lost in the beauty of Blake's words," Emma responded and quickly proceeded to read the next stanza. She wanted to evade any other questions Lady Abigail might have for her.

“*In every cry of every man, in every infant cry of fear, In every voice, in every ban. The mind-forged manacles I hear:*” Emma recited, and Lady Abigail came and sat beside her so she could read the next stanza.

“*How the chimney sweeper's cry, Every blackening church appalls, And the hapless shoulder's sigh, Runs in blood down palace walls.*” She read and closed the book.

“But I haven't read the last stanza yet. Why have you closed the book?” Emma asked with raised eyebrows.

“Because it wouldn't be fair on my part if I hid it from you that the duke has a huge library filled with books of literature and poetry.”

Emma felt her stomach flutter at the thought of sitting down to read poems together with the duke. She felt heat rush up to her face.

“We could go there together one day, you know. You needn’t be embarrassed about your love for books. I love them as well,” Lady Abigail said with a warm smile.

But the thought of being in the duke's library made Emma’s cheeks turn crimson.

“I’m certainly not embarrassed, and I confess I am quite excited about the thought of the library. Sadly, Abigail, I doubt we shall be able to go to the library together. That is not within my realm as governess, and I do not think the duke would approve,” she concluded with a wistful smile.

“I'm afraid you must have a wrong perception of the duke. He's very kind and generous.” Of course, Emma knew that already, but she was wary of doing anything that might result in her losing her job.

“I have no arguments against that whatsoever, and I shall consider your suggestion.”

Lady Abigail smiled brightly, as she dearly loved books. “Is that a promise, Miss Emma?”

“Yes, it is. Now, let us return our attention back to reading the books we have at hand already.”

“Of course,” agreed Abigail, and they both turned their eyes to the tattered old poetry book once more.

Together, they read and recited some more of the poems within, and Emma sensed the bond growing between them over their shared love. Sometimes they were both moved by the words on the page, sometimes they giggled at the old-fashioned language, sometimes they sat in quiet awe at the poets’ skill.

Their lyrical reverie was broken when Lucy walked through the door with a tray of tea and biscuits. She bustled in, her silky brown dress swishing as she approached them.

“Tea for you, Lady Abigail.” She poured the hot tea from the silver-gilt teapot into a dainty white porcelain teacup and handed it to the young woman.

“You too, Miss Fletcher.”

“Thank you kindly, Lucy Brown.”

Emma noticed Abigail’s sly smile and gazed at her wonderingly. She couldn't imagine what it could mean, yet she fancied it had an oddly dreamy quality to it. One might almost think Abigail was smiling at some unseen imaginary friend. Nothing was clear about that smile to Emma, but she was briefly diverted from her thoughts of it by Lucy serving them a plate of delicious-looking biscuits to accompany the tea.

“If you’ll excuse me, Lady Abigail, Miss Emma. I’ll be in the kitchen if you should need anything else.”

“Thank you, Lucy,” the two women said simultaneously as they watched Lucy bustle out of the drawing-room. As she closed the door behind her, Emma turned immediately to Abigail, once more trying to divine the meaning of the young girl’s peculiar smile. She found herself eager to hear what her charge would say next.

“Is something troubling you, Abigail? Something you would like to share?” she asked, smiling to mask her concern.

“Well, may I share my little secret with you, Miss Emma? It will be safe with you, won’t it?”

“I hope so. I suppose it depends on what it is.”

Abigail grinned and leaned closer. “I think I have a feeling of … admiration … for the Duke of Elsby ... for Theo. In fact, I think I may have rather a crush on him,” she whispered, lowering her gaze to her fidgeting fingers. Her cheeks flamed crimson.

A relieved Emma smiled warmly.

“Indeed. I saw how he stole a glance at you earlier at Elsby Manor.”

“Really?” the girl gasped in delight. “Do you think he likes me too,

then?"

She blushed once more and a broad smile lit her pretty face. Emma was pleased they had already grown close enough for Abigail to trust her with such an important secret. Wistfully, she allowed herself to imagine forming such a close bond with the duke, but just as the pleasant picture began to form in her mind, the door opened, and the Dowager Duchess entered, bringing their conversation to an abrupt halt.

“What is all this excitement about, Abigail?”

“Nothing, Grandmother.”

“Good afternoon, Dowager Duchess,” Emma said with a curtsy.

The old lady ignored her, addressing her granddaughter again. “We shall be leaving in the next hour to go into town for some dress fittings. Please ensure you are ready.”

Without pausing, she turned on her heel and left the room, not once acknowledging the governess's presence. It was clearly evident to Emma that the dowager did not like her at all, although the reason for it was a complete mystery, known only to the dowager herself.

"Well, I must go, I suppose." Abigail sighed and rose with obvious reluctance. "But I shall see you at dinner, Miss Emma," she said as she followed her grandmother out of the door.

"Yes. Enjoy your shopping trip," Emma said, her smile fading as Abigail disappeared.

She adjusted her skirt and sat down again. Absently, she held the tattered poetry book in her hand and wondered why on earth the Dowager Duchess should take such a dislike to her for no apparent reason. Eventually, she had to abandon her fruitless train of thought, vowing not to let the woman's dislike affect her ability to do her job.

The children's education and welfare must be her priority, despite

the old lady's black looks. She suddenly thought of all the people she had ever cared for—her mother and father, and Elizabeth, now the children … and perhaps … the duke.

She stood up, feeling suddenly languorous. She had no duties for the rest of the afternoon, so she headed for the library, the duke's domain. As she descended the stairs, Emma once more found herself lost in pleasant fantasies about her employer; she pictured a life with Robert, a marriage, children, everlasting happiness. But as she reached the Great Hall, she forced herself back to reality, reminding herself of her station in life and her purpose as a governess to the duke's wards.

"You don't fit into his world, Emma," she thought aloud.

I'm certainly not about to jeopardize my position by dwelling on such silly, schoolgirl fantasies, she told herself. The thought of being banished from the duke's house … from the duke himself … was unthinkable. She made up her mind. She would forget about her unrealistic expectations and concentrate fully on her reasons for taking the position in the first place— to support her sister.

As much as she tried, though, the same silly, romantic thoughts about Robert kept coming back. She couldn't stop thinking about his fine build, his handsome features, the way his ash-blond hair and mutton-chop whiskers framed his oblong-shaped face, his fine, aquiline nose, and those kinds, hazel-brown eyes that always seemed to fix her with their gaze. And that smile…

He was simply too good-looking, too charismatic, for any young lady to ignore.

“Miss Emma?”

“Oh my!” She held her hand to her breast in shock. “You startled me, Your Grace!”

“My apologies. I saw you from afar, and I thought we might take a walk in the gardens if that notion pleases you, of course.”

Oh, why is he making it so difficult to avoid him? She had been trying so hard to push aside the unrealistic romantic imaginings of him that had filled her thoughts only moments ago … but here was … asking her to accompany him on a walk … just the two of them!

But how can I refuse him? He is my employer, after all. Perhaps he is lonely? It was certainly true that the duke seemed to prefer keeping company only with his family members and his best friend, the Duke of Elsby. Could it be that he enjoyed the company of the young, well-educated governess? *Perhaps he wants to discuss the children's education further? Yes, that must be it.*

"Would you please walk with me, Miss Emma?" The duke asked once more, a note of pleading in his voice. He looked down upon her, his expression suddenly boyish and unguarded.

"Of course, your Grace," she finally agreed, swayed by the beseeching look in his eyes. Smiling, he offered her his arm, and she took it. They walked on side by side out into the gardens.

She couldn't hide her excitement as they strolled down the well-manicured paths of the formal garden, taking in the intoxicating scent of lavender and roses. She found it impossible to stop herself from smiling, and every time she dared to glance at the duke, he was smiling down at her. He was an amusing conversationalist, eager to point out his favorite spots for play or to hide in the grounds as a boy, the surrounding forests where he had learned to hunt, and the best gallops for the horses.

She found him utterly delightful to listen to and reveled in hearing his boyhood reminiscences, yet it struck her that it seemed to have been a rather lonely time for him, having no siblings to share it with. She began to relax and enjoy herself in his company for the first time. It was a beautiful day, and she was walking in a beautiful garden with the man she …. loved?

After a while, he began to ask her about her own childhood and her past. She told him all about Whitehaven, her mother’s illness and how she had nursed her through to her death.

“How terrible for you to suffer her loss at such a young age, and after nursing her for so long. It shows what loving, dutiful lady you are if I might say so, Miss Emma. I am glad you had your sister to help you carry on, though, to give you a purpose. It strikes me that this is one reason why you and lady Abigail have grown quite close in such a short time you must understand something of her terrible loss. Of the children’s loss, I mean.”

“Yes, I think so too, Your Grace. We have discussed it. Pardon my saying so, but she suffers, I think, from feeling unable to talk about her parents to anybody in the family for fear of upsetting them too. It was somewhat the same for myself and Elizabeth; my father would not tolerate the mention of her after she died. It is hard to grieve fully when one cannot talk about one’s loss, I fear.”

“I see. Thank you for telling me that … it rather explains the air of silent sadness Abigail seems to have about her. And, no doubt, it is much the same for Henry. I miss my sister too. She was far bolder than I about many things, and I admired her tremendously, especially the way she used to stand up to the Dowager Duchess.”

Emma couldn't help smiling at the thought. "She sounds like a wonderful lady," she said, and he nodded.

"But I understand, Miss Emma, that you have not yet been formally presented to society. Was that because of your mother's illness?"

"Yes, but it is not something I regret. The time spent with her was too precious."

"Indeed. And may I ask, with such a gentle upbringing as you have clearly had, what has made you seek employment as a governess?" Robert asked gently.

Emma hesitated to reply. They had just reached a part of the garden where a stone bench was carefully positioned to make the most of a stunning view over the River Dore in the valley below.

"May we sit a moment, Your Grace?"

“Robert, please. I insist. Of course, let us sit and admire the view.” He gestured at her to be seated and she arranged herself gracefully in the bench. He sat a few feet away from her, looking earnestly into her face.

“If it is to be Robert, then it must also be Emma,” she said firmly. He nodded in happy affirmation, his heart skipping several beats.

“You were about to tell me, I hope, about your reasons for becoming a governess.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Emma found herself telling him all about her discovery of her father’s business failings, how bad investments severely diminished their capital, and how she had vowed Elizabeth should not find it out or suffer the consequences. It was vitally important that she should have the means to have her debut into society and find a good husband to support her.

“Hence my decision to find employment. My accomplishments

naturally recommended me to such a position. And so, here I am at Dalwater, enjoying my young charges very much." She finished with a broad smile at the thought of Abigail and Henry.

The duke moved slightly closer to her. "And you are doing an excellent job with them … Emma. I couldn't have hoped to find anyone better. I do hope you will remain with us for many years," he said warmly, reaching out a hand toward her and then thinking better of it when he observed her sharp look. It was very hard not to take her hand or stroke her cheek or … he cleared his throat.

"Once again, Emma," he went on, "you have impressed me with your deeply caring nature. Not many young women of your station would be generous or brave enough to sacrifice their own future for that of their sister. I am truly full of admiration." He was in such earnest that he unconsciously moved a little closer to her, so they were now sitting only a foot apart, their heads inclined toward each other as the conversation deepened.

Emma blushed and bowed her head, then looked him in the eye

again. “Oh, it was no sacrifice. I prefer to have a purpose in life rather than be some man’s ornament, the fate that probably awaited me. Besides, financially speaking, I could see I had little choice. Realistically, I am the only one who can earn money … and I doubt Father will be able to bring our finances back from the brink with so little capital available to him. So, you see, Robert, my working is also a question of necessity.”

He gazed at her with those hazel-green eyes filled with wonder.

“What a marvelous woman you are, Emma Fletcher,” he breathed, making her blush again and a shiver of delight run up her spine. “Truly, you could never be a mere ornament to any man.”

“That is kind of you to say, Robert.” Emma’s heart pounded in her breast, and a delicious waft of his cologne almost had her swooning, but she collected herself.

“And … were there no suitors, then … no possibility of marriage rather than becoming a governess.” He awaited her answer with

breath held.

She shook her head, and he loosed a sigh of pleasure, which he instantly tried to cover with a cough, how he wanted to take her in his arms!

“No, nothing like that. Whitehaven is not exactly overflowing with eligible bachelors, and I would not like to have married purely out of financial necessity to help my family. The idea of marrying someone you do not have a deep affection for is abhorrent to me, I admit.” Why had she said that? His closeness, the strong physical pull she felt toward him as she looked into his handsome face, was almost impossible to resist. Once again, she had to force herself to remain outwardly calm.

“Oh, I completely agree. Unfortunately, as you have heard, my mother sees things rather differently. She is eager to parade me on the marriage market during the coming Season. I fancy I shall be put up on the block and auctioned off to the highest bidder.” He laughed ruefully.

“Yes, I have rather got that impression,” Emma said with a sympathetic laugh. “Yet you are the duke, and, surely, you have the last word on any match you make.”

“It will be a fight to the death between us, I fear,” he said, laughing again but looking at Emma with a strange glint in his eye. “You see, Emma, as Mother is often pointing out, I have not always made good choices in the past. Well, *a* choice, to be specific.”

Emma looked at him enquiringly, her heart beating even faster. Did she want to know of his past romantic failings? Yes, she decided, for past experience makes us what we are and she very much liked what the duke was revealing himself to be.

“I see. That is unfortunate, but I believe we should be able to put our past mistakes to rest, whatever they may be.”

“If only Mother thought so too. You see, Emma, I made a terrible mistake, a misjudgment about … someone. Some years ago, I was all

set to be married. Her name was Isabel. Everything was arranged. I thought I loved her, and I thought she loved me too. Perhaps she did. Who knows? We planned the whole wedding together. And then…" He paused, clasping his hands and looking at the ground. "…Then, one night, a few weeks before the wedding, she confessed … she was carrying another man's baby."

Emma gasped in shock. "Of course," he added, looking up at her, tears in his eyes. "It was devastating. I thought I would never get over it. Not only was it painful, but it was also humiliating. Of course, Mother never lets me forget. That is why she is so intent on choosing a bride for me this time."

"Oh, how terrible for you, Robert," she exclaimed gently, involuntarily taking one of his hands and squeezing it comfortingly. "But it wasn't your fault … you could not have known. You loved in good faith, and the lady, who may very well have loved you too, was forced to let you down. No doubt she found herself in a very difficult situation and hardly knew what to do for the best."

“I suppose you are right. She married the child’s father shortly, after-though I believe he was a reluctant groom, and the union is known to be unhappy. Poor Isabel.” He suddenly turned to Emma, covering her hand with his own large one. “That is the first time I have been able to think of her as ‘poor Isabel.’ Before I have always imagined myself to be the injured and foolish party, but now… thank you, Emma, for helping me to see things in a new way.”

“It is indeed sad that you had your heartbroken and were forced to go through the humiliation of canceling the wedding. You must have had many hopes centered on it, but you have shown that you can love. That is very important, I believe. But sometimes, I think … though we wish for things, they are not meant to be. Fate says something different, perhaps something better lays in store for us. I hope that is how it is with you, Robert.” She looked into his eyes and smiled sincerely. He shifted closer to her and took both her hands in his, and she did nothing to stop him. Her heartbeat had slowed, and she felt full of sorrow for his pain, wanted nothing more than to comfort him.

“Thank you, Emma. Your words are a great comfort. Yes, I have proved I can love … and perhaps I shall love again.” He looked deeply into those bewitching green eyes and felt as though he could drown in them.

“Your mother may be right in some ways. You may very well meet a nice young lady during the Season. You are unlikely to do so here, buried in the countryside.” She said, holding her breath as she stared into his beautiful eyes.

“I’m not so sure about that,” he murmured, leaning forward as if about to kiss her. His hands were warm on hers, and she felt their intoxicating strength, his lips were so near… Suddenly, she snapped up straight, making him jump. Quickly, they moved apart, and a crimson blush colored her cheeks. They stared at each other or a few moments.

“Well,” said Emma with difficulty, rising and smoothing her skirts with nervous hands. “I think it is time I should go. I have … several errands to attend to.” It was a blatant lie, but she felt that she would

be lost if she didn't leave his company soon.

"Of course, I have kept you too long. Shall we return to the house?" he offered her his arm again, once more the formal duke. She took his arm, and they proceeded in silence to the house, both apparently deep in thought.

What is happening to me? Emma was thinking desperately as she clung to the silent duke's arm. Was he really about to kiss me? One more, she reminded herself sternly that, though she had come to care for Robert - her heart told her that she must never let her feelings overcome her duties as governess to his wards, nor could she ever forget her lowly station in life in comparison to the duke's. He was her employer! What was she thinking, holding his hands, imagining kissing him? And what was he thinking now, of her?

It was all wrong! There could never be anything romantic between them that would not be regarded as scandalous and would ruin her reputation. Besides, the dowager hated her. Her loving heart, if not curbed, was sure to end in being sent away from Dalwater … and that

thought she could not bear.

Chapter Fifteen

Emma had had a busy morning while giving Henry his lessons that day. Though the young boy still struggled with his sums, she was patiently helping him to improve his mathematical abilities. She remembered her mother's approach to teaching her numbers as a child, and employed the same gentle means with Henry, with some success.

Henry was due his fencing lesson in the afternoon, so the duke was occupied, and Her grandmother once more engaged abigail, so Emma had a few hours free to spend as she wished. She looked forward to spending a few peaceful hours in the library reading, which the duke, being mindful of her love of books, had given her permission to do whenever she wished. However, this was her first visit to the repository of knowledge, as Abigail jokingly referred to it.

Emma pushed open the heavy door and stood on the threshold, her

breath quite taken away by the sight before her. She couldn't help but be amazed as she saw the seemingly endless rows of books ranged neatly on the many glassed-in shelves, which rose to the ornate, painted plaster ceiling.

"Why haven't I visited this place in the past in all this time since I have been here?" she murmured as she opened her eyes wide to take in the sheer number of books, in all shapes and sizes, and covering all the subjects she could think of.

The duke had a great love of books, just as she did. She entered the room, closing the door softly behind her, and ventured deeper into the library, tracing the lowest shelves with her fingertips as she went.

"But this too wonderful," she thought aloud. "I shall come here every day from now to read poems." After exploring the library for a while, she discovered an interesting poetry book she had not seen before. She flipped through some of the pages for a few moments before deciding it would do perfectly. She then looked around the spacious room to find a perfect spot to sit and read. She chose a chair

close to one of the large, mullioned windows to the left of the library, where the rays of the sun penetrated.

Thinking suddenly of her mother and how the two of them had shared a special love for poetry until her death, Emma made herself comfortable and was soon deeply engrossed in the book, reciting the beautiful, moving poetry quietly to herself and savoring their music.

She was so engrossed that she didn't notice the door open quietly and the duke enter the library. He stopped in his tracks at once, his ears pricked, surprised at hearing a soft voice reciting beautiful verses. He was mystified. It could not be Abigail, as he had only just seen her with his mother in the drawing-room. There seemed to be only one other candidate.

“You have a beautiful voice,” Robert said in a little deep and appreciative tone.

“Oh!” Emma started out of her reverie and, seeing him there, gave a little laugh of embarrassment.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I hope I’m not disturbing you. I shall take my leave,” she said, blushing crimson, closing the book, and about to rise.

“Nonsense! The pleasure is all mine, Miss Emma,” Robert said kindly. “You must certainly not leave on my account. I insist you stay.” Reluctantly, Emma sat down again. “It is delightful to find someone enjoying the place as much as I do. She blushed again.

“It is very nice here. A treasure trove. I don't think I have ever seen such a splendid library.”

“As I have already said, you are most welcome here whenever you wish to make use of it. In fact, can I suggest we might read some books together? Poetry especially seems far more enjoyable when read aloud, I think, don’t you? And as we are both here now, let us begin right away. You do recite very well, you know.”

Emma trembled. Alone in the library, reading poetry aloud with the duke? The man she could not stop thinking about. It seemed to her a recipe for disaster, but she could think of no excuse to leave without being rude. And she feared she might even make him angry if she disagreed. She pulled herself together and tried to put her nerves aside.

"If that is what you wish, Your Grace."

"I see we are back to formality again … Miss Emma. That is a shame. Yes, it is my wish. Shakespeare's sonnets are my favorites." He crossed the room, opened a cabinet, took out a book, and handed it to her, holding the page open. He settled himself into a nearby chair.

"Let's start here," he said, pointing out a well-thumbed passage.

Emma, her stomach full of butterflies, cleared her throat and began to recite in a wavering voice.

“When to the sessions of sweet silent thought, I summon up remembrance of things past, I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought, And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste...”

She paused, looked up, and found him staring at her, a slight smile on his face. How handsome he looked just then, reclining in his chair, and seeming so relaxed and content, the shafts of sunlight through the window lighting his features. The butterflies rampaged uncontrollably inside her, and her hands shook. What would it be like if he kissed her?

“Please, do continue,” he said, still staring. She returned to the verses before her, having difficulty focusing on them.

“Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow, For precious friends hid in death's dateless night, And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe, And moan the th' expense of many a vanished sight...” Her voice grew stronger, as she recalled this was a favorite of her mother’s.

“I hear in your voice that you like the sonnets as much as I do,” he

said, smiling.

“Yes, my mother and I used to read them together before bedtime when I was a little girl,” she said, unable to resist smiling back at him.

“And now that you are fully grown now, I suppose there’s no need for bedtime poems anymore,” he said jokingly.

“Oh, I’m sure she wouldn't hesitate to read me bedtime poems if she were still here,” she said, her smile suddenly becoming sad.

Instantly, he was on his feet and close to her. “I am so sorry, Miss Emma, I didn’t mean to make you sad. Please forgive me.”

“Not at all, Your Grace, it is good to remember her, but I do miss

her at such times as this. Sonnet 30 was one of her favorites too, you see." Tears welled in her eyes, and she groped for a handkerchief, but before she could find it, he handed his own to her. She took the snowy bit of linen and dabbed her eyes. "You must think me very foolish," she murmured, deeply embarrassed once more.

"Not at all. I am the foolish one. Come, let is put the Bard aside and look for something more interesting."

"I really should go…" she said, making to rise again. So high was the tension she felt between them, she felt torn; she should go, but she did not want to. Stupidly, she held the damp handkerchief out to him.

"Please stay," he said gently, rising to his feet. "And please, do keep the handkerchief. I have many."

"Thank you, Your Grace, you are very kind. I don't know what came over me."

"I find it very easy to be kind to you, Miss Emma." He said with a

smile that disarmed her completely. She blushed deeply once more, her face hot, but she knew she would stay. “And to talk to. Indeed, we surely have many more things to talk about.”

“If you wish, Your Grace.” She sat back in her chair, more relaxed, as she twisted the scrap of linen between her fingers. “What shall we discuss?”

At that moment, the library door opened, and Lucy Brown entered with a small tray to serve the duke his tea.

“Oh, I’m sorry to interrupt, but I’ve brought your tea, Your Grace,” she curtsied as she placed the teacup with a saucer on the reading table. “I’m afraid I didn’t know Miss Emma was here too, and there’s only enough tea for one.”

"Thank you, Lucy. Yes, kindly bring a larger pot so Miss Fletcher can have some tea too. Oh, and please bring some of that excellent lemon shortbread if you have some.”

“Certainly, Your Grace. I’ll bring it directly.” With a half-smile at Emma, Lucy went out, closing the door behind her. In a few minutes, she reappeared with a tray laden with plates of tiny cakes and shortbreads, which she placed by the tea tray on the low table between them.

“Mmm, thank you again, Lucy. A veritable feast is set before us, eh, Miss Emma?” He joked, helping himself to shortbread and gesturing for Emma to do the same, but she declined. Tea was all she could manage in the circumstances, she felt.

“As your lordship pleases,” Lucy said with a smile, exiting the room and closing the door, leaving them alone once more.

“How are the lessons progressing? Are you finding it a strain yet?” he asked, polishing off his shortbread with a look of satisfaction. “I must say, your presence has greatly eased me of my concerns about the children. I hardly know what we would have done without you, Miss Emma.”

“Well, I am only doing my job as a governess. You pay me very generously, Your Grace, and I find the children delightful to work with. I think they are both progressing well.”

“Yes, I must commend you for your efforts with Henry’s arithmetic in particular. It seems you are a very good influence on them both. They both seem much happier since your arrival. I do hope you realize how appreciated you are,” he said, apparently unable to stop smiling at her as he talked.

“Thank you kindly, Your Grace. It is a great pleasure to hear you say so.” She smiled back, feeling warmth spreading inside her at his compliment. He stared at her, marveling at her beauty, her grace, and her warm smile. Pretty Emma. He couldn't help but look at her lips as she talked. It was now coming to the point, he realized when it was impossible to deny to himself the strong attraction he felt for her.

He hadn't felt that way for such a long while, and it shocked him. Ever since the affair with Lady Isabel, his heart had been frozen. He hadn't allowed himself to love any woman or give in to any feeling of

attraction towards one, even if he felt it. It felt too dangerous, a risk of being hurt all over again that he wasn't prepared to take. This feeling with Emma was entirely new for him.

"I cannot say there haven't been challenges. Dealing with Henry's lack of arithmetical ability is one of them, to be sure," she laughed. "But, as I mentioned, he's greatly improving now."

Robert found himself once more focusing on her lips as she talked about how her days were filled with teaching and guiding the children, making sure to mention Abigail's precocious love of poetry and books in general. She spoke with such earnest passion that he had no doubt of her genuine care for his wards. But, in truth, the more she talked, the less Robert found he could pay attention to her words. She is mesmerizing, he thought, charming, entertaining, intelligent … ravishingly beautiful. His thoughts dwelt on Emma's lips as he wondered what it would be like to press his own upon their soft perfection.

"Do you not agree, Your Grace?" she suddenly said, looking at him

with such an open, enquiring expression that it was almost a physical effort to tear himself away from gazing longingly at her lips.

"Um, yes, absolutely," he replied, feeling guilty for not having been listening to her. What was worse, she actually seemed to realize it and laughed outright a full, generous laugh. This time, it was his turn to blush.

"I'm sorry, Miss Emma, I find what you say … and the way you say it … so fascinating, I'm afraid I got lost in admiration for a moment at your good sense." He paused, not knowing what to say next, as she remained looking at him good-naturedly. He noticed the fine spray of freckles across her perfectly straight nose, and the way her dimples appeared when she was in a relaxed mood. Oh God, help me, he thought helplessly. This simply will not do. He gave himself a mental shake and stood up, putting his hands behind his back and pacing, trying to control the joyful grin that he knew was trying to burst out onto his face.

"I hope we shall see you at dinner tonight, Miss Emma. Your

presence graces the table, and is a comfort to the children, I believe."

She hesitated, and a little of the light that had been in her eyes moments before dimmed, much to his discomfiture.

"Am I to attend, Your Grace?" she asked, appearing slightly alarmed at the thought.

"Why, of course," he replied, stopping next to her, feeling a little selfish but determined to have her at the table. There would be few other entertainments to pass the time, as Mother was sure to embark on one of her lectures about the season. He sat down again.

"Well, if you insist, Your Grace. I can't help wondering if it is quite right for your ward's governess to join the family for dinner." She said, looking at him worriedly.

"Miss Emma, you have dined with us since your arrival, quite fittingly, in my opinion. It is not as if you are some lowly servant but rather a gentlewoman, well-bred, and with the manners of a lady. You

need not fear you do not belong."

She looked at him in astonishment, her green eyes widening in pleasure and her dimpled smile banishing the look of concern.

"How kind you are, Your Grace. I'm sure you are taking pity on my discomfort, and I thank you heartily for it. I am honored to be invited to sit at your table, of course."

Robert was thinking how nice it would be to place his lips on Emma's white neck when the housekeeper's voice in the hallway suddenly brought him back to earth with a bump. He scolded himself inwardly for his thoughts and tried to pull himself together. Nothing could happen between himself and Miss Emma, nothing that would not break his heart and destroy her reputation utterly.

It could never happen. She's the governess, an employee, he told himself. It was selfish of him to even think of such things as taking her in his arms and, but she would be at dinner if only to spite his mother.

“More tea, Miss Emma,” he said hoarsely. “And this lemon shortcake is delicious.”

Chapter Sixteen

Robert and Abigail stood in the Great Hall chatting quietly just before the clock was due to chime the dinner hour. A footman went by toward the dining hall pushing the final trolley sent up by Lucy Brown from the kitchens, and delicious smells wafted by the pair as they waited.

“Where has Henry got to?” Robert asked his elder ward, looking concerned. “The dowager won’t be happy if he’s late. You’d better go and find him, Abigail.

“Yes, so you had, child, and be quick about it,” echoed the dowager imperiously, coming down the stairs to join them.

“Yes, Grandmother. I expect he’s still playing somewhere. He should pay more attention to the time.” Abigail said with irritation, rushing up the stairs to see if the boy was in his room.

“Don’t be too hard on him when you find him,” Robert called after her. “Good evening, Mother,” he added, nodding at the old woman.

“This is exactly why I say you need a wife, Robert. A man cannot properly raise children by himself, no matter how much he might love them,” the Dowager Duchess said as he started to walk away from her towards the dining hall.

But she followed him. “You need a wife who is capable of being a good mother to these young ones. I know you've been through a lot with Isabel, but that's not an excuse for not marrying and getting a wife now,” she continued insistently.

“I really don’t wish to discuss it with you now, Mother. I have heard what you have said, and I completely understand. But, please, just let me do things my own way and in my own time, will you?” He replied, pausing and turning back to let his mother see his annoyance.

Abigail was already returning with her brother, Henry, who seemed

agitated. She was holding his arm and pulling him down the stairs with her, apparently uninterested in whatever was bothering him.

Then, Robert took in a sharp breath as he gazed up the stairs beyond the pair. “Oh my…” he murmured when he saw Emma descending the stairs. She looked beautiful, wearing a pale-pink satin dress and a pair of matching long gloves. Her auburn hair has been tamed into a chignon to add to the sophisticated look. He couldn’t help but appreciate her appearance with his admiring gaze, and his eyes locked onto Emma’s as she approached them smiling. *She is simply stunning.*

Robert, Abigail, Henry, Emma headed for the dining hall together, where the dowager had gone ahead.

“That is an exceptionally pretty dress, Miss Emma,” Robert said, offering her his arm.

She took it with a graceful nod. “Thank you, Your Grace. Abigail very kindly leant it to me.”

“We got dressed together, and as we are about the same size, I thought Emma could borrow one of mine. It suits her perfectly,” Abigail said, looking happy to see Emma looking so elegant.

“I must say, it is very good to see you looking much happier these days, Abigail, and I think we must all thank Miss Emma. Abigail grinned and took Emma’s other arm.

“Yes, it is fun being able to share my wardrobe and discuss womanly things with someone who understands.”

“Womanly things, is it?” said Robert laughing as they entered the dining hall, where the dowager already sat in her place as stately as a queen.

“Yes, you see, Uncle Robert, she doesn’t laugh at me when I say that.”

But that just made Robert laugh more. The party seated itself, with the dowager remaining silent and shooting a reproachful look at her

son, then at Emma, reserving her darkest look for young Henry, who fidgeted in his chair.

“I have something to tell everyone,” he suddenly burst out excitedly. “I want you all to know that I got full marks for my arithmetic today! And I couldn't have done that without my wonderful governess!” Henry added gleefully, and even the dowager looked pleased for the child.

Emma blushed with modest pleasure and said, “That is kind of you to say so, Henry, but the hard work was yours.”

“Well, yes, I did work hard,” Henry said proudly, tucking in his napkin. “Where is dinner, Grandmother? I’m hungry.”

“In a moment, child, hush,” she admonished him. “It is certainly excellent news about your arithmetic,” she added, “but I’m sure you still have a long way to go.”

Henry said nothing to that, merely folding his arms and scowling,

before Emma smiled at him, and he beamed once more.

The elegant appearance of the governess in her lovely gown was not lost on the dowager, who also noticed her son's appreciative gaze as it rested on the young woman. She alone seemed unwilling to acknowledge the governess's progress with both of the children, and, when he glanced at his mother, Robert immediately knew she was still unhappy with his having hired a governess. She persistently refused to acknowledge Emma's presence, which Robert found rude and embarrassing but could do little about.

To the surprise of everyone, apart from the dowager apparently, who smiled, they heard the front door being opened, and then voices, as if people were being ushered inside. Robert looked at his mother questioningly, but she simply arched her eyebrows at him. A few moments later, the butler appeared at the door of the dining hall.

"Lord and Lady Irrisoll, and the Lady Beatrice," he announced with a low bow, and the guests entered the dining hall.

Everyone at the table stood up, Robert shooting a dark look at his mother, who merely sniffed and went to greet her guests. The others merely looked surprised. Robert stepped forward too, greeting them with a polite bow. Lady Beatrice, extravagantly attired in a red gown with a satin waistband and a necklace of rubies, stared pointedly at Robert throughout the exchange of pleasantries, although Robert tried to avoid her gaze.

"I hope we are not late," said Lady Irrisoll. "The traffic was very slow coming out of town and we were slightly delayed."

"Not at all, my dear, we were merely exchanging our news of the day before your arrival," said the dowager soothingly.

Small talk ensued until the last of the trolleys pushed by footmen were in place. When the butler announced dinner was ready to be served, the company took their seats at the table. Lucy had presented them with a multitude of dishes to choose from; the table was loaded with various soups, a selection of roasted meats, including partridge, beef, and pork, along with different vegetables and potatoes, with

plenty of pickles, jellies, and relishes to add flavor. There were also fruit custards, baked puddings, and fruit to follow. Robert set about carving the beef.

"A very warm welcome to you indeed, my dear friends," the dowager said, looking pleased with herself. Glancing up from carving the beef, Robert noticed his mother seemed about to make an announcement. With a sinking heart, he wondered what it could be. He put down his knife and signaled for the butler to take over the carving, then went to his mother and spoke quietly into her ear.

"Mother, may I have a word with you … in private, please?"

She looked annoyed. "Robert, not now, can't you see I'm trying to do something important here?" she hissed. "Oh, very well."

"Please excuse us for one moment," she told her guests, then followed Robert into the hall.

"What is it?" she demanded.

“Why have you invited them here without consulting me, Mother. I know what you are up to, but may I remind you, I have never agreed to marry Lady Beatrice. Why are you making things so difficult for—”

His mother did not allow him to finish but simply stalked off back into the dining hall. He stared angrily at her retreating back. *Why must she always be so adamant and controlling? She knows very well this is not what I want.* He scratched his head, not knowing what would stop his willful mother. He walked back to the dining hall, shaking his head in annoyance.

Right in the middle of the meal, Lady Beatrice started a deeply boring conversation with Robert, all the while fluttering her eyelashes and smiling coyly at him. He was horrified, as it meant the dowager had already given her some false hopes about marrying him.

“And how are you getting on with your wards, Your Grace?” Lady Beatrice asked Robert, having merely acknowledged Abigail with a nod and hardly looking at Henry.

“Oh, we’re all getting on very well, aren’t we, Abigail and Henry?” He grinned at the pair, who nodded.

“Henry, you still have some food left on your plate. Please finish it,” the dowager said.

She continued to discuss the children in hushed tones with Lady Irrisoll while Lady Beatrice feigned interest, keeping her eyes on Robert. Now and again, the older women would glance at Emma as they went on with their inaudible conversation. Emma kept her head down and concentrated on her plate. She had no wish to get involved in their discussions of the children, but she wished Robert had thought to introduce her to the guests. She felt at a distinct disadvantage.

Abigail seemed to be enjoying herself, though, apparently hanging on Lady Beatrice’s every word and laughing unnecessarily. The whole dinner would have been enjoyable if Lady Beatrice had just remained silent and attended to her meal.

“You should hire some help for the children, you know,” Lady Beatrice advised Robert loudly. Abigail flicked a small smile at Emma.

“What a good idea, but, as it happens, I have already hired some,” he said, trying to be as polite as possible to the annoying young woman.

“That is Miss Fletcher over there.” The dowager gestured at Emma, sitting close to Robert.

“Oh, so that is the governess.”

“Please, my lady, call me Emma," Emma replied, smiling shyly.

“Very well. How nice to meet you.”

“It is my pleasure, Lady Beatrice.”

“You are quite pretty, for a governess,” Lady Beatrice said.

Emma blushed. “Thank you, my lady,” she replied warily.

“No doubt you consider yourself fortunate for being privileged enough to dine with people of our stature,” Lady Beatrice said with a sneer. Robert almost exploded at that but forced himself to bite his tongue, looking apologetically at Emma. He knew he mustn’t be openly impolite to Lady Beatrice, so he continued eating his meal without showing any reaction but thinking how to mean and calculating Lady Beatrice was. *She has a bad character and does not treat people with respect.*

“Yes, in most houses I have visited, the governess always dines with the other servants. It is most unusual, so be thankful you are permitted to sit at table with the present company,” Lady Beatrice went on. Why doesn’t she just stop talking? Robert thought angrily.

“Indeed, I know how lucky I am,” Emma said quietly, trying to hold back the tears filling her eyes, more convinced than ever that she didn’t belong.

Robert could see how humiliated Emma was. His gut twisted into knots, and he struggled not to protest and to show the required regard for Lady Beatrice in his manners, speech, and behavior, but he had to do something.

“Mis Fletcher is my guest, Lady Beatrice,” he said finally. “And, with the utmost respect, of course, I should like her to be treated with the same regard as all my other guests,” he added unsmilingly. Lady Beatrice looked shocked.

“May I have your permission to leave the table now, Your Grace,” Emma murmured, putting down her cutlery and napkin and rising to her feet. “I have a slight headache.” Robert seethed but had no choice but to agree to Emma’s plea, quite understanding her to wish to be gone. The others sat in silence, watching as Emma left the room, noticing the satisfied look on Lady Beatrice’s face as she did so.

“Forgive our daughter's discourteous manner,” the Duke of Irrisoll opined, clearly embarrassed. “She ever was forthright in her speeches.

Please accept my apology, Dalwater." Lady Beatrice seemed indifferent to her father's need to make an apology, merely lifting her chin haughtily. The children stared at Robert with horrified expressions while his mother and Lady Irrisoll studiously attended their plates as if unaware of what had passed.

"That is quite alright, Irrisoll. Miss Fletcher had complained of a headache earlier, in fact, so her leaving us is not unexpected." Robert spoke calmly, but inside, he felt as if he could happily throttle both Lady Beatrice and his mother. In truth, he was still rather shocked to find a lady as endowed as Lady Beatrice could have such a bad character. Of course, even his mother must now understand there was no possibility of him marrying *that* kind of person. Ever since she had sat down at the table, she had ignored the children, despite freely giving her unasked advice on their upbringing. She had shown them no warmth at all except to talk about disposing of their care to a governess.

Yet, she continued to behave as if she was certain of marrying him. His mother's doing, he was sure. But even she must now see that Lady

Beatrice was incapable of relating to the two youngsters. It seemed all she cared about was a new carriage, dresses, jewelry, and luxuries. He'd be damned if he would marry her!

Chapter Seventeen

Emma lay awake in her in the dark. She had put out the candle, hoping to sleep, but it eluded her; now, she really did have a headache, and her thoughts were solely occupied with Lady Beatrice's derogatory remarks at the dinner table.

She recalled bitterly how well the evening meal had begun, with everyone—except the dowager, of course—commending her appearance and showing appreciation for her having made such good progress with Henry's arithmetic. But how badly things had ended when Lady Beatrice had arrived, the haughty young noblewoman clearly intent on reminding Emma of her lowly station in the household. And Emma couldn't help feeling she was right; the governess had no right to sit at the table with such illustrious company.

"I should have known better and refused His Grace's command to

attend," she thought aloud. She had felt utterly humiliated and embarrassed, and she hadn't been able to burst into tears on the spot, as she had felt like doing. The only thing which had cheered her was the way Robert had defended her, going so far as to politely caution the Duke of Irrisoll's wayward daughter. That meant a great deal to Emma.

She knew immediately that Lady Beatrice's presence was a threat to her. Though Emma had no clue that the dowager planned a match between her son and the young noblewoman—she might even have considered resigning if that were the case, to avoid the inevitable dismissal—Emma still felt Lady Beatrice posed a grave threat to her continued employment at Dalwater.

"What a fine lady she is, to be sure," she thought bitterly to herself." At first, she had admired Lady Beatrice's beauty, but beauty, as her father had often told her, was only skin deep. This was clearly very much the case with Lady Beatrice. *She is provocative and flirts shamelessly with His Grace. She is a rude, over-dressed, spoilt brat!*

She moved restlessly, her thoughts churning, then was startled out of her gloomy reverie by a light knock on her door.

“Who could that be?” she murmured, getting up, tying on a robe, and opening the door. There was Lady Abigail, also in her nightclothes, holding a candle.

“Goodness, Abigail! What are you doing out of bed so late?” Emma muttered, unable to read the expression on Abigail's face.

“Can I come in, Miss Emma?” the girl asked. “I want to talk to you,” she added, looking unhappy and cold.

“Yes, yes, come in, quickly. You’ll catch your death out there!” She opened the door wider, and Abigail slipped inside.

“Thank you,” she immediately went to the bed and sat on it, pulling the quilt around her shoulders.

“What is it, Abigail?” Emma asked as she gently sat beside her charge, who drew Emma into the quilt’s embrace too.

“Miss Emma, there is something bothering me, and you are the only person I can talk to about it.” Abigail paused to look into Emma’s eyes, as though to assure herself of her attention. “Since my brother and I lost both our parents, we have been devastated. Our life was torn apart overnight,” Emma patted Abigail’s hand. “And you know, taking us on as his wards has had a significant effect on our uncle, the duke’s life too.”

Abigail paused before continuing. “So, as you can understand, there are two people I am very worried about at the moment: my brother, Henry, and Uncle Robert. And I want to entrust them to your care,” she finished in an almost pleading tone.

“I’m not quite sure what you mean, Abigail. Why do you think you can entrust me with their care? I am merely the governess; I have no power.”

“Because I believe in you, Miss Emma. I feel safe with you, and I know they are, too,” Abigail explained as she held Emma's hand, looking at her beseechingly.

Emma quailed somewhat at the thought of such a heavy responsibility. And how exactly was she to carry it out? She found her heart was suddenly pounding hard.

“You see, Uncle Robert’s heart was broken by the only person he ever truly loved, Lady Isabel. Everyone thought she was going to be his wife until she ruined things. Since then, he hasn't been the same. Lady Isabel was all he ever wanted, and they had planned their whole wedding together…” she lowered her voice and blushed, “…only for her to confess she was carrying another man's child on the wedding eve. The wedding was canceled, and there was a terrible fuss about it all.

Robert seemed to have lost all interest in taking a wife. It’s as though he hasn't been able to love anybody else. He has stayed out of London at Dalwater, keeping to himself ever since,” Abigail added, her

face, Emma thought, looking far too serious for a young girl of sixteen. Nevertheless, it was clear she noticed everything going on around her in the home.

Although Emma already knew about Robert's heartbreak, the situation seemed clearer when hearing it from Abigail. She wondered if she could be of help to Robert. At the same time, she didn't want to lose her position, especially with Lady Beatrice beginning to appear in the picture

"We noticed he started to get better when he became our legal guardian as if he took on a new lease of life. But, you see, Grandmother thinks he needs a wife to help him take care of us … so she wants him to marry Lady Beatrice." As she said it, she looked into Emma's eyes once more. Emma hoped she could not see the fear there.

Emma was now seriously frightened: if Lady Beatrice became her mistress, she was bound to be sent away. Lady Beatrice would combine her forces with those of the dowager to accomplish it. Her stomach twisted into knots, and she felt herself growing hot.

Her dreams and hopes of a long and happy life working at Dalwater, helping the children … seemed suddenly to crumble to dust. She tried to pull herself together for Abigail' sake.

"Marrying will certainly relieve the duke of a lot of his concerns and responsibilities," Emma forced herself to say.

"Yes, but not to that … witch," Abigail cried, clutching Emma's hand again.

"Abigail! That is rude."

"Rude? Well, I should have to have her give me lessons in that to be as dreadfully rude as she is. She is utterly horrid. She cares nothing for Henry and me, and the only reason she wants to marry Uncle Robert is because she thinks she'll have more of what she wants—dresses, jewels—and she'll be able to show off even more than she does now! She is intolerable."

“Hmmm,” said Emma. “I fear you are right, Abigail, although I don’t like the way you phrase it. Besides, you heard what she said to me at dinner.”

“I’m so sorry about that, Miss Emma, but it simply proves I am right.” Emma felt her hand being squeezed reassuringly again.

“Thank you, Abigail. Yes, I fear you are right.” The pair drew closer and linked arms beneath the quilt. “But what can we do about it?”

“Well, I’m certain Uncle Robert is against the idea of marrying her. All that is needed is to give him some way to stand up to Grandmother. Something … better to … hope for.” Abigail looked at Emma mysteriously.

Unsure of what to make of it, Emma said, “Then I hope to goodness he finds that soon, for only the duke has the power to decide what he wants and whether he will resist the dowager’s wishes. I can confide in you, Abigail, I hope, that I fear for my position if your uncle does marry Lady Beatrice, for she is sure to dismiss me immediately.”

“I know,” said Abigail, tears starting in her eyes. Emma held her closer to her side. “Henry and I fear that too.”

They sat in silence for a few moments until Abigail said, “As you know from Grandmother’s continual going on about it, I shall be introduced formally into society this Season. I am expected to find a potential suitor. But my brother … I'm concerned that, if I should marry, Henry will be left without someone to comfort him. Our uncle will probably be too busy to pay much attention to him, and can you imagine what Lady Beatrice will do? She’ll probably pack him off to some horrid school miles away as soon as she has the chance. And, since Grandmother is so worked up about Uncle finding a wife to care for him and us, you are the only choice to help them both. So, I want you to promise me you'll do everything you can to take care of my brother. Promise me you'll try to support him, no matter what happens.” Now, the unshed tears fell, and she sobbed against Emma’s breast. Emma, too, was close to tears, sharing the girls' concern for the future should the duke be forced to marry Lady Beatrice.

Fishing out a hanky, she gave it to Abigail. “Hush, my dear. Dry your tears. I promise I shall do everything in my power to protect you all, especially Henry, from what may come.” She felt she must make the promise, and she wanted to be true to her word, but how would she do it? A mere governess?

“Thank you, Miss Emma,” Abigail sniffed, hugging Emma.

When she at last sent the girl back to bed, Emma locked the door and got back into bed. She tossed and turned, her mind burning with the thought of the promise she had just made … and wondering how she could ever hope to keep it.

What if I am sent away and cannot protect Henry? And … what about the duke… how shall I bear being sent away from him?

A pain shot through her heart at the thought, knowing she was foolish to think such a thing. But she couldn’t help herself ... *even after so short an acquaintance*, she finally admitted to herself … I truly care for him.

Her mind in turmoil, she got out of bed, fastened her robe about herself once more, put on a heavy cloak, and, holding her shoes in her hand, crept from the room in search of some way to clear her head.

Chapter Eighteen

Emma wasn't the only one who couldn't sleep at Dalwater that night. All that had happened earlier at the dinner table had ruined the duke's night, too.

It was well after midnight, but he could not rest, his anger at his mother and Lady Beatrice still bubbling inside him. How could she have been so rude to Miss Emma? And what did his mother think she was doing, springing the arrival of the Irrisolls on him like that?

How in the world can she believe I would ever marry such an unkind woman? He punched his pillow once more in rage. It's time I had a serious talk with Mother, to make her understand once and for all that I intend to make my own decisions about who and when I marry, without her interference. Besides, I don't find Lady Beatrice at all attractive, despite her fine clothes and jewels, and she is spoilt and self-centered. I don't understand why mother cannot see all this, he

thought, wondering especially why the dowager seemed so set on making lady Beatrice his wife.

“No!” he told the room, “It will not happen!” He shook his head furiously as he threw off the covers and got out of bed. Signing deeply, he crossed to a window to stare out at the night. Sometimes, just looking at the night sky and the expanse of stars soothed his soul when he was troubled.

The moon was bright as he peered out, and he was surprised to see a lone figure sitting out there by the lawn on one of the stone benches. They were sitting with their back to him, and, though the moon illuminated the figure, there were still shadows enough to disguise the person’s identity.

But something in the slender form and its resting attitude hinted an answer. Is that ... Miss Emma? He felt a heavy thud in his heart upon seeing her sitting alone, outside at that late hour. What could she be

doing? Recalling the unpleasant incident at dinner and the fact she had claimed a headache, set him worrying. *I must go down and speak to her.*

Hurriedly, he threw on shirt and trousers and slipped out of his chambers, praying he would not to be seen by anyone as he made his way downstairs and out of the front door. On his way out, he wondered if he was acting wisely. His mere presence could compromise her if they should be seen together unchaperoned.

But he couldn't help himself. He simply had to apologize —after all, he had insisted she dine with them that evening, although at the time he'd had no idea of what the dowager was planning. Yes, it was a risk being alone with her, especially at such a time, but frankly, he no longer cared.

He must make sure Miss Emma was alright. And if they were caught and she was compromised, well, then … damn it all … he would

marry her! The thought made him dizzy, though he wasn't sure why.

Emma felt comforted sitting on the bench in the cool moonlight. She was deep in thought, turning over in her troubled mind all that had happened since dinner earlier that evening. However, she admitted to herself after some time that the focus of her thoughts was the duke.

She recalled once more his trying to defend her from Lady Beatrice's spite at the table. How many noble dukes would have acted so gallantly for a children's governess? It was yet more proof of his goodness. Unlike Lady Beatrice, Emma reflected, the duke's good-looks matched his kind nature.

Emma was startled by the sound of approaching footsteps and looked around fearfully. When she saw who it was, her posture immediately relaxed. She appeared composed as he took a seat at the other end of the bench.

“Good evening, or should I say good night, Miss Emma? I hope I’m not disturbing you. I saw you sitting out here and wanted to see how you were.” Robert said gently, examining her features for sign of distress.

“I am well, Your Grace. But I could not sleep, and I thought the tranquil atmosphere out here might help.”

“I want to apologize to you about what happened earlier at dinner. That was such unnecessary rudeness from Lady Beatrice. Please believe me when I say that I had no idea they had been invited to join us.”

“None of it was your fault, Your Grace,” Emma replied, smiling at him.

They regarded each other in silence for several moments. Suddenly, he reached over and took Emma’s hand gently in his. She did not remove it.

“You know, Miss Emma … Emma … you're special, and I'm very happy having you as the children governess. I haven't made a lot of wise decisions in the past, it’s true, but choosing you was one of the few I *have* made," Robert said softly. He reached to touch her cheek, and she trembled.

“Thank you ... You Grace, I am flattered by your kind words,” she said shyly.

“Please, can we go back to Robert and Emma? “He pleaded, and she nodded gently.

“If you wish… Robert.”

“There are so many wonderful things about you, Emma. You are easy to talk to, and the children and I enjoy being around you. There's beauty in being a good listener, you know. You are someone who seeks to make connections with others and brings joy to them by inviting them to see things from new perspectives.”

“Thank you again," she said, smiling. He felt her squeeze his hand gently and felt encouraged. She has such beautiful, kind eyes, he thought, falling into their green depths again. She has a tranquil sort of beauty that is made to last.

He brushed her cheek with his fingertips once more and moved closer, feeling an irresistible force drawing them together. She leaned against his caressing hand, a tender look in her eyes. Again, she trembled as their gazes locked, and they moved almost imperceptibly slowly toward one another.

“You're very beautiful,” he breathed helplessly. The world was shrinking until all he wanted to see was her face. She could not hide her emotions from him. He could see them on her innocent face. In her eyes, he saw a passion that answered his own. His body filled with warmth as he took her in his arms, her eyes closed as she offered up her lips to his.

Then, a sharp sound made them spring apart, both casting around in alarm for its source. They saw nothing, and the sound did not repeat.

Even so, the magical moment was broken. Robert stood up, feeling awkward. He cleared his throat.

"I had better leave you, Emma. I wish I dared stay, but … well, forgive me. I hope you will sleep now and that I shall see you on the morrow."

"Of course, on the morrow," she said, sorrow in her voice. He left her there, wondering at it, as he slipped back into the house unseen, he hoped. He cursed whatever had parted them just as he had been about to kiss those invitingly soft lips. There was no denying it to himself; Miss Emma Fletcher bewitched him, and he did not know what he would do about it.

Chapter Nineteen

Emma spent the next afternoon in the schoolroom with Henry working on his writing, although she was planning to finish soon, as Henry due for a riding lesson in the next half an hour. The poor boy had been working so hard and was making excellent progress, and she felt the fresh air would do him good.

She was looking forward to the end of lessons herself, as she was both weary from lack of sleep and restless at the memory of her moonlight encounter with the duke … Robert.

He had held her tightly in his strong arms and they had almost kissed! It had felt simply wonderful, and the mere thought sent electricity running through her. She could still smell his sandalwood cologne. Yet at the same time, her heart felt heavy with sorrow and

foreboding. She was being foolish, hurting only herself.

Nothing could ever come of her love for Robert, even if he felt the same way about her as she did for him. They were classes apart, and any kind of a lasting relationship that was not scandalous was impossible. She pushed the thoughts aside and turned back to the task in hand.

Just she was inspecting the English exercises Henry had completed, the door opened, and Abigail came in, smiling broadly. She was dressed very smartly, looking more sophisticated than ever. Emma smiled back at her proudly.

She really was an attractive and rare young woman, and it was easy for Emma to love her. She had grown to love young Henry, with his usual cheerful enthusiasm. The thought of one day having to leave them simply added to Emma's inner burden of woe. Again, she tried to dismiss her somber thoughts for their sakes.

"Abigail, how lovely to see you," Emma said, looking up from

Henry's exercise book, assuming a bright smile.

"Hello, Sis," said Henry, throwing down his pencil, clearly pleased at the distraction.

"Hello, I hope you're both well. I wondered if you are very busy, Miss Emma. I am due to choose a new dress from the atelier in town. It's for my birthday and coming out ball. I would love it if you would come with me, if you can spare the time, that is." Abigail said, sitting carefully on one of the old wooden chairs.

"Why, yes, we were just about to finish. I would love to come with you, it will be a nice change to go into town. Henry has a riding lesson soon, so I shall be free." She glanced down at her dress, brushing off some chalk dust. "I must go and freshen up and fetch my things first though. Is that alright?" she added.

"Of course. The carriage isn't due for another half an hour or so. Why don't you meet me in my room when you are ready? We can go down together then."

“Wonderful. Thank you for thinking of me, Abigail. A little outing will do me good, and I can’t wait to see you in your new dress.” Emma turned to Henry. “Well, young man, I think you are officially dismissed,” she told him with a smile. He immediately jumped up and threw his arms around her waist, hugging her tightly.

“Thanks, Miss Emma. You are the best teacher ever! Promise me you will stay here forever,” he said, his face buried in her skirts. Almost overcome with tender emotion, she stroked his head gently and put an arm around his shoulders. A tear came to her eye.

Her heart ached for his loss, and she thought of the promise she had already made to Abigail about always protecting Henry. But how could she mislead the boy? If their uncle married Lady Beatrice and she was dismissed…

Emma thought carefully before speaking. “We none of us know what the future holds, Henry. You both know that all too well. And while I cannot promise to always be here at Dalwater, I can promise to always

be your friend, Abigail's too. And if you should ever need me, for any reason, you can call me and be assured that I will always come as fast as I can."

She finished by hugging him more tightly before releasing him. He scampered over to his sister, who also hugged him.

"Thank you, Miss Emma. I feel much better now," he sniffed, clearly moved.

"Yes, that means so much to both of us, Miss Emma," Abigail put in, smiling warmly at Emma, her own eyes shining.

"And you know, you both mean a great deal to me, as you always will, as long as I live."

After Abigail had gone, Emma left the schoolroom, conscious that she did not have much time. She dashed to her room and splashed her face with cool water, tidied her bun, gathered her bonnet, shawl, gloves, and reticule, then put on her outdoor boots. Glancing at her

reflection in the mirror, she was satisfied with her appearance.

As she set of toward Abigail's chambers, she thought again about how much she loved the two youngsters. Although it had only been a short time since she had taken up her post as their governess, she felt the three of them had formed a close bond. As wonderful as that was, the thought of losing them if Lady Beatrice should become Duchess of Dalwater sent a painful pang through her.

It was simply a thought too terrible to contemplate. Although she knew she would one day like to have children of her own, she was certain she would always want Abigail and Henry in her life too.

She tapped lightly at Abigail's door.

"Come in, Miss Emma" the girl called. Emma entered, smiling at the bright, comfortable room where they had shared many hours inspecting Abigail's extensive wardrobe.

“Please, do sit down for a moment. I am almost ready,” Abigail said excitedly, popping a bright, beribboned bonnet over her shiny dark curls.

“Thank you. I must say, Abigail, you look very pretty today. The thought of getting your new dress obviously agrees with you,” Emma joked.

Abigail giggled, turning to Emma, her bonnet now in place. “Of course! As Grandmother says, a young lady can never have too many pretty dresses. And I want you to help me chose it.”

“I shall be honored!” said Emma, watching in amusement as Abigail distractedly wandered about the room, collecting up her gloves and reticule, then turned to smile at Emma.

“Shall we go then, my dear governess? I think I hear the carriage coming around.”

They linked arms, but before they could move, the door opened.

"It is time to leave, Abigail. I hope you are ready," came the Dowager Duchess's stern tones. She stood in the doorway leaning both hands on her cane. She looked unpleasantly surprised to see Emma there. "What are you doing here, Miss Fletcher?" she snapped at her. "Why are you not with Henry in the schoolroom?"

"We have finished lessons for the day, my lady. Henry has gone for a riding lesson."

"Miss Emma is coming into town with us, Grandmother," Abigail said clearly, raising her chin. The dowager frowned. "Very well," she sniffed at last and turned to leave. "Come along then, no time to waste."

In the carriage, Abigail kept up a continuous stream of excited chatter about what was the latest fashion in dresses, what colors she favored, what materials she wanted, and what accessories she might need to go with her new ball dress. "I have seen a very pretty pattern

straight from France," she said, "which I think would look very well on me, perhaps in blue or pink satin … or perhaps both together? It would be lovely to have some pearl beading, and a sash in a contrasting color perhaps. Of course, I shall need a new reticule to go with it. Embroidered silk would be lovely. I could make one myself if I can find some nice silks and some pretty stuff today, but I shall need to know what color the dress is going to be first. Of course, I might—"

"That is enough for the moment, Abigail," said the dowager suddenly, banging her cane on the carriage floor. "You are giving me a headache."

Abigail subsided at once. "Yes, Grandmother." The old lady nodded and looked out of the window. She seemed determined not to address Emma at all. Emma tried her best not to let her anxiety show, sending Abigail a sideways smile of sympathy, which the girl returned. The rest of the journey into town passed in silence, but it was not too awkward. The further they went into old London, the busier the streets became, and there was much to marvel at or admire outside the window.

Nevertheless, Emma felt relieved when they finally arrived at the grand atelier where Abigail was to choose the fabrics for her new dress, be fitted for it, and have it made up for delivery the very next day.

The Atelier Veronique was an exotic sanctum strictly reserved for the rich and fashionable females of London. Emma fancied it to be a cross between an Arabian bazaar, of which she had once seen a strikingly colorful painting, and as gilded as Cleopatra's palace might have been. Every square inch of the walls was covered with great swathes of fabrics of all kinds, velvets, silks, and damasks in a rainbow of beautiful colors.

These were punctuated by life-size color plates of elegant models wearing the latest fashions in dresses, riding costumes, outerwear, and underwear. In between those were huge, plate-glass mirrors, which reflected the shop's luxurious interior infinitely, and before which the fashionable clientele tried out the new creations.

The place smelled of sweet oil and a mixture of all the varying perfumes worn by the chic clientele. One side of the spacious shop was given over to displaying the endless fabrics, ribbons, lace, beads, and gemstones of every type, feathers, and satin-edged handkerchiefs, and every sort of elegant accessory a lady could ever wish for.

The other side contained two parallel rows of comfortably upholstered chairs, between them a sort of broad gangway, where beautiful model girls walked back and forth showing their elegant outfits off to the ladies seated there with intent to spend their husbands' money.

Emma knew that at the back of the shop, hidden from view, would be the cramped quarters of the nimble-fingered seamstresses, who worked miracles, and long hours, laboring to turn out perfectly fitted garments for the great ladies of the London *ton*.

As soon as they arrived, the dowager was shown to a chair by an obsequious assistant, who only had to snap her fingers for a pot of tea and a china cup to be brought and set on a low table at the dowager's

side. The unsmiling old lady set aside her cane and prepared to wait.

"Now Grandmother is settled, Miss Emma, let us explore. It truly is a treasure trove, isn't it? I am sure I shall find something lovely for my birthday here."

"It truly is quite breath-taking. I have never seen anything like it. Now, you had better tell me your ideas about the sort of dress you want. Shall we look at patterns first and see if we can find the one you like?" Abigail agreed and off they went to inspect the pattern books.

"So, I must decide whether to pick the waisted design or the Empire-line, with the skirt falling from beneath the bust," Abigail concluded after looking through so many dress patterns, Emma felt quite dizzy.

"Then, I suggest we start by looking at the satins and silks, Abigail. The silks come in many beautiful colors and silk is very light … just right for dancing."

Abigail almost squealed in delight and clapped her hands. "Oh, yes,

let's. Silk would be lovely, don't you think, perhaps with a satin sash?" They headed for the section where the bolts of luxurious imported fabrics were stacked high. With the help of an assistant, they spent the best part of an hour discussing and deciding, inspecting the different fabrics, trying various colors against Abigail's complexion and hair. Abigail picked out several possibilities, showing each one to the stern-faced dowager for final approval.

The older woman approved the choice of silk and satin, but each successive color sample was dismissed for various reasons.

White was pronounced boring. Cream, also boring. Apricot, overdone. Pale blue, wishy-washy. Pink, too childish.

"She approves none of them, Miss Emma! I suppose we shall just have to keep looking," Abigail sighed, returning deflated. "Oh, it's so hard to choose!" she complained.

Emma made sure to have her back turned to the dowager when she flicked her eyes toward a bolt of beautiful lilac-colored silk. "Have you

considered that shade, Abigail? I think it will suit your complexion perfectly."

"The mademoiselle is right, I think," agreed the assistant, fetching a sample immediately. She held it up to Abigail's face in front of the mirror.

"Yes, it is unusual, and it sets off your dark hair and pale skin wonderfully, Abigail. And if it is made up in the Empire-line style, with a contrasting satin sash beneath the bust and trimmings, I'm certain you shall be the belle of the ball." Emma said, smiling warmly.

Abigail clutched the sample to her, beaming. "Oh, it is lovely. Thank you, Miss Emma, I think I have made my choice. Yes," she told the assistant. This is the one."

"And for the sash and trimmings?" asked Emma, motioning with her head to a deep violet satin nearby. "The violet would make for a lovely, subtle contrast, and the color suits your eyes, too. You could even have a reticule and gloves made up to match," she added.

Abigail looked over. “Oh, yes, that would be perfect.” She breathed. “And both would look well with the pearl beading I wanted. Oh, thank you, Miss Emma. I don’t think I could have ever decided upon anything all by myself. And Grandmother is so old-fashioned. I just hope she approves.” Off she went to show her choices to the dowager, who by some miracle, appeared to be pleased.

That settled, a delighted Abigail returned, and the assistant fetched the bolts of silk and satin to be made up.

“I could never have chosen such lovely materials without you, Miss Emma. Thank you,” said Abigail. To Emma’s surprise, the girl leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek. Emma stood amazed for a few moments, rubbing her cheek, while the assistant began taking Abigail’s measurements, Warmth filled her, and she smiled wonderingly at the loving gesture. However, her joy was marred somewhat by a glance at the dowager, who was glaring at her from across the room. She hung her head and turned back to the business in hand.

After having chosen the details for the trimmings and matching gloves, the pearl beading for the neckline, and a simple pearl tiara to complete the outfit, the girls were finished at last. Only then did a glowing Abigail, with a weary but pleased Emma in tow, return to the dowager, who's mouth was a thin, hard line.

"I thought you would never be finished, young lady. Though I must say you have chosen well. I am tired. I trust we may go home now?" the dowager said tightly, as Abigail helped her to rise and handed her the cane.

"I'm sorry, Grandmother, but I'm sure you remember that it can take quite a long time to pick just the right dress." She glanced at Emma with a mischievous smile as they left the shop and got into the carriage once more. The dowager glowered at Emma before ignoring her again by looking through the window. Emma felt deeply uncomfortable and remained silent.

A few minutes after they had pulled away, Abigail sat forward in

her seat and said in a sugary voice, “You know, Miss Emma helped me to choose the colors for my dress, Grandmother. Isn’t that kind of her. She has such good taste.” She smiled broadly at the older woman, who turned from the window to regard her granddaughter with a look of deep disapproval.

“I fail to see what a mere governess can know about the fashions of the *ton*, let alone what is suitable wear for a young girl’s coming out ball, the ward of a duke. In future, I shall oversee any trips to buy clothing,” the dowager bit out, turning on the helpless Emma a look of venomous disdain.

“Well, I am very grateful to her for her help, Grandmother, and it is my dress after all,” Abigail shot back, huffing and proceeding to ignore the old lady for the entire journey home. It was very uncomfortable for Emma; if she had not been so conscious of her station and propriety, she may well have leaped from the carriage and run all the way home simply to escape the poisonous atmosphere. But she tried hard not to let the dowager spoil her pleasure at having helped Abigail and the gesture of affection her charge had shown to

her governess.

On the stroke of seven, Emma went down with the children to the dining hall to find the duke already seated, looking at a newspaper. As soon as he saw them, he smiled and put it aside. He was pleased to see the children, but his gaze was once again caught by the governess. She was once again wearing the pink dress Abigail had gifted her, which looked splendid with her pink cheeks and auburn hair. The thick tresses were twisted into a sophisticated plaited bun. Although she smiled at him with a polite nod as she approached the table, he noticed she looked rather subdued, and her green eyes seemed darker somehow.

“Good evening, Uncle,” Henry suddenly piped up, approaching the

duke, and standing straight. “May I present our governess, Miss Emma Fletcher?” Henry jokingly announced, with a low bow as Emma sat down.

The duke laughed. “What are you up to, young Henry?” he asked.

“I’m practicing my manners, Uncle. Abigail has been teaching me. Look, she showed me how a gentleman must stand to bow to a lady … like this.” He demonstrated once again, this time bowing so low he almost fell over, which drew laughter from the others.

“And that is an improvement,” joked Abigail.

"Don't embarrass me, Lady Abigail," Henry retorted, eliciting more laughter.

“Good evening, Uncle,” Abigail said, going to the duke and kissing his cheek affectionately. “We had a lovely afternoon at the very fashionable Atelier Veronique, didn’t we, Miss Emma?”

“I am glad to hear it my, dear girl. Dare I venture to suggest that Miss Emma’s views on what is fashionable for young ladies belongs rather more to the present century than the last, which is more than can be said for some.” He wiggled his eyebrows comically and the children giggled. He was playfully referring to the dowager, of course. Emma looked down guiltily, to hide her smile, but his teasing filled her with pleasure.

“Miss Emma is so kind, and she helped me choose the most divine colors and materials and … oh … everything! My dress is perfect, Uncle, you wait and see!” Abigail gushed.

“I have no doubt Miss Emma has excellent taste in such things,” the duke said, unable to stop himself from beaming at Emma, nor his cheeks beginning to heat up, noticing her fresh beauty once more.

She smiled back at him, her eyes suddenly lighting up and losing the troubling darkness he had glimpsed there only moments before. “She is, indeed, very kind. Thank you, Miss Emma, for helping Abigail

today. I certainly can't wait to see this marvelous creation at the ball." He tried to reign in his smile and the way his eyes seemed to always stray to the governess. He felt it unwise to openly hint at his attraction to Emma, even though he was relatively safe while his mother was absent. But once she arrived, any sign of it would be dangerous to Emma, and that he wanted to avoid at all costs.

Emma saw how he smiled at her, and her mind instantly transported her back to the moonlit garden, their warm embrace, how safe she had felt in his arms, and how they had almost kissed. A shiver of delight traveled down her spine. Unable to help herself, she smiled back at Robert. Was he experiencing the same pleasurable memories about her? Was he wondering if the passionate moment had been real, or had they simply been two people swept away by the warm, moonlit night, both vowing that nothing of the kind could ever be allowed to happen again?

Whichever it was, their private thoughts were broken into by the arrival of the dowager. Without greeting his mother or smiling at her, his annoyance with her almost palpable, Robert nevertheless dutifully

rose to help her to her chair.

All gaiety ceased as she settled into her place. She acknowledged the children, but studiously ignored Emma yet again. Dinner was served, and the meal passed joylessly, with only the slightest of small talk being exchanged. Robert was glad when the meal ended.

After dinner, Emma and the children retired to the parlor to play a card game until it was Henry's bedtime. He suddenly asked, "Miss Emma, please would you read to me tonight? I think it would help me fall asleep."

"Why, I'd be delighted, Henry. I'm honored that you would ask me," Emma said, pleasantly surprised at his request. After Henry had bid goodnight to everyone, they pair climbed the stairs to his room. He immediately brought Emma well-worn book about a toy soldier, which he said was his favorite. It seemed a little young for him, but Emma said nothing. She had a suspicion it had been a gift from his mother and, therefore, had much sentimental value for the little boy.

Once he was settled in bed, with Emma sitting beside him, he turned to her and said, “My mother used to read to me at bedtime. I miss her,” Henry stared into her eyes as if searching for something. Emma smiled down at him and stroked his hair from his forehead. How she loved the spirited, cruelly bereft boy!

“Then let us take up her tradition again, shall we? How would you like it if I read to you every night at bedtime from now on?”

In answer, he took her hand and kissed it gently, making her heart swell with emotion. “Mother and I would like that very much. Thank you, Miss Emma.”

Before the story ended, Henry was fast asleep. Emma looked down at him once more. How angelic he looks, she thought, softly kissing his forehead and pulling up the covers, before she left him to his peaceful slumber. And how desperately she wished they would never be parted.

Chapter Twenty

It was a fine, sunny afternoon a few days later when Robert decided to take a short ride over to see Theo at the Elsby estate. They had agreed to have some fencing practice, so Robert had brought his gear, but there was an ulterior motive for his visit, too.

After the unforeseen … incident … which had occurred between himself and Miss Emma in the garden the other night, well, he felt he hadn't been the same. To what was now becoming a rather worrying extent, he often found himself deep in thought about the children's governess and frequently lost his concentration on whatever he was doing. Theo seemed the perfect person to bring some common sense to the situation.

I hope I don't embarrass myself during our fencing match. I don’t feel quite up to par just now, he admitted to himself, drawing near to the estate. The friends had been dueling since they were youths and

were very competitive. Whoever won the match would add the score to their long-standing record, making sure to rub it in the other's face at every opportunity, the loser bent on revenge.

When Robert arrived at Elsby, Theo came out to greet his old friend with a warm embrace. "I thought we could have a light luncheon, then have our match later, when it has cooled down a bit," Theo suggested, leading the way to the dining room, where cold meats, cheese, bread, fruit, and wine was set out.

They sat down and Theo charged their glasses, while Robert filled his plate. He hadn't eaten since breakfast and was hungry.

"So, how is everyone at Dalwater?" Theo asked, helping himself to some roast ham.

"Well, everything is about the same, but there is a lot of excitement about Abigail's coming out ball. That seems to occupy a lot of both her and Mother's time at present. Apparently, there are endless arrangements to make. You know the sort of thing. I'm enjoying

Abigail's excitement, though, if I'm honest. It's good to see her smiling about something."

Theo nodded, chewing mouthful of ham. "Hmmm, I'm looking forward to the ball myself," he said when he'd finished. "Went up to town yesterday, in fact, to order my new suit for the occasion," he added with a satisfied smile. "Want to make the best impression. I say, old friend, you're not going to challenge me to a duel if I dance with lady Abigail, are you?"

Robert glared at him for a moment, then smiled. "Not that I want to encourage a reprobate like yourself, Elsby, but I have the distinct impression that if I tried to stop you, Abigail would challenge me to a duel herself," he said, chuckling.

Theo looked somewhat relieved yet gratified at the same time. He leaned back in his chair. "Well, my thanks, Robert. I had wondered. It is nice to get the seal of approval from the glowering guardian. And to know that the young lady is willing to dance with an elderly chap like myself."

“One dance, though, Theo, and be sure to keep your hands to yourself,” Robert warned, and Theo laughed.

They chatted on for a while, at their leisure, and later in the afternoon, when the heat of the sun had cooled a little, they went out to the pavilion and had their fencing bout.

Robert had been right about not being on form, and Theo beat him hands down. When they had finally finished and taken off their masks, both sweating profusely, they sat and recovered with cool drinks and a cigar each. Theo crowed about his victory but couldn’t help noticing his friend seemed a little distracted.

“Well, you made that too easy for me, old chap. What’s up? Mind not on the game?” he asked.

Robert hesitated before saying, “Yes, there is something troubling me, Theo, and I want to get your advice on it.” Theo looked instantly intrigued.

“I knew it! You seemed a little preoccupied during luncheon. Come on, then, fire away.”

“Theo ... you remember Miss Fletcher, the children’s governess I brought with me a few weeks ago to ride with the children?”

“Miss Emma. Of course, I remember. Miss Abigail seems to adore her,” Theo replied.

“Well, you know she is a gentlewoman, well-educated, but not out in society.”

“Yes, she is very genteel,” Theo agreed.

“And she is a wonderful influence on the children. Henry has been making marvelous progress with his lessons, and, well, you know what they have suffered … it seems she is making them feel much happier since … the tragedy.”

“I am pleased to hear it, my friend. I know their care weighed heavily upon you until recently. What of it?” Suddenly, Theo sat up, looking sharply at Robert. “Ah! I think I know where this is going … you have gone and fallen for the governess,” he crowed. “Oh, this is rich!” He shook his head and chuckled into his wine.

“I am glad you find it so amusing.”

“Well, Robert, it is rather, as the French say, a cliché. I mean, the duke falling for the governess, it’s that same old chestnut, isn’t it?”

“No, Theo,” Robert said so tersely, his friend looked at him seriously. “It is not “that old chestnut”, as you so vulgarly put it. I have never felt this way about a woman since…”

“Isabel,” Theo replied, all humor gone from his voice. “If that is the case, then you are skating on very thin ice, my friend. There is no future in it for either of you. Unless you have an illicit affair, which I doubt a respectable lady like Miss Fletcher would even contemplate

for a moment, you are endangering her and putting yourself in the way of heartbreak and ridicule. Having said that, old friend, there are plenty of examples of past dukes marrying commoners. Dukes can do pretty much what they like without fear or favor, and you certainly wouldn't be the first, Rob, if you married Miss Fletcher."

Robert sighed deeply and took a deep draught of wine. "I know that, but the problem is Mother. She wants me to marry Lady Beatrice," Robert said morosely. He went on to tell Theo about the disastrous dinner, his mother's underhand behavior in inviting the Seymours to dine, and Lady Beatrice's rudeness to Emma. He then explained his meeting with Emma in the garden later that night and what had happened between them."

Theo looked appalled. "Well, you have gotten yourself into a fine pickle, Robert. I hardly know what to say. But whatever you decide to do, you had better do it quickly if what you say about the dowager champing at the bit to marry you off to Lady Beatrice is true."

"Sadly, it is all too true. It's almost as if Mother's gone a little mad

since the tragedy and my taking wardship of the children. She simply won't listen to reason. The problem is that Mother would never approve of my union with the lady. I see how she looks at me when I smile or talk with Emma, whom she completely ignores most rudely. I am quite ashamed of her at times, Theo. And I was to marry Emma, and I fear it would destroy my mother. She would never recover what she would see as a scandal besmirching our family name. I cannot do that to her."

"I understand, dear fellow, but she may have to accept it. You are a grown man, a duke, and you must make your own decisions before the dowager does something rash. Since it seems likely that Miss Emma does feel something for you, and the children plainly adore her and are benefitting from her presence, I suggest you weigh those facts very carefully against your mother's disapproval. She has, in a sense, had her life. She must now let you have yours, whoever you decide to wed. And remember, there's nothing like a brace of bouncing grandchildren to bring the stiffest old biddy around."

Robert laughed, feeling somewhat lighter at heart. "Thank you so

much, Theo. I knew I could count on you for a ... fresh perspective. Well, my friend, I better be on my way home soon, before it gets dark. But I thank you for your fine hospitality, and sound beating!"

Robert arrived back at Dalwater at dusk. He had not been in his chambers very long before a maid informed him that his mother expected him in her chambers shortly to talk to him privately. Having freshened up and changed, Robert reported as bidden, wondering with dread what his mother wanted to speak to him about. He was sure it wouldn't be anything he was going to like.

Since becoming a man, he had seldom ventured, or been invited, into his mother's inner sanctum. He was unsurprised to find that little had changed in so many years. His mother was seated in an upright

chair by the fireplace and gestured for him to take the sofa opposite. She smiled at him, which made him even more fearful.

"Thank you for coming so promptly, Robert. Now, I expect you are wondering why I asked you to come."

"Not really, Mother. I think I have an idea what you want to talk about," he said, sighing.

"Well, then, in that case, I shan't bother with small talk. I want to know when you intend to begin formally courting Lady Beatrice. There is no time to waste, you know. The Season is approaching, and she is bound to have many offers. Abigail's coming out ball presents a fine opportunity."

"Mother," he began in exasperation, "I have told you many times that I have no intention of courting Lady Beatrice, or anyone else, for that matter, unless I have chosen them myself in my own time."

"But what is your objection to her?" the old lady asked, showing

similar exasperation. “I simply don’t understand you, Robert. She is beautiful, likes you, and I’m sure she would be happy to marry you. Besides that, she will make an excellent wife and help you take charge of the children’s futures. In addition, she comes from a perfect family and will bring a generous dowry, as well as a fine fortune of her own on her father’s death. What is there to object to?”

Robert stood up. “What I object to, Mother, as I have repeated many times, is Lady Beatrice’s unpleasant personality. She is vapid, arrogant, rude, and I have no interest in her whatsoever, except as someone to avoid wherever possible. What is more, I do not love her, and I shall not marry any woman I do not love!” he shouted, continuing before his mother could interrupt. “The other thing I object to is that you, my mother, dare to interfere in my affairs. I am a grown man with many responsibilities. There is no urgency for me to marry at all, and you well know it. The children are doing very well, considering what they have been through, and that is because I have employed an excellent governess for them, for whom they have great affection.”

The old lady huffed disdainfully. “That chit. Have you thought for one moment how I suffer, having that woman at my dinner table? It is not seemly. I don’t know how I explained it to the Seymours. It was deeply embarrassing, but at least she had the good grace to leave.”

He shook his head at her, marveling at her obstinacy. “You know, Mother, we have never really clashed like this before. But now that we have, I see for the first time what a meddling, foolish, stubborn old lady you have become.” His mother gasped as she looked up at him, clearly surprised at his outburst.

“Moreover, I remind you that I am the head of this household. Indeed, it is my household, which you occupy through my generosity alone. Yes, you may well look shocked, but I tell you, speak no more to me about this. And mend your attitude toward Miss Fletcher at once. It is an embarrassment to me and upsets the children. Now, I shall leave you to think about what I have said. Good night.” And with that, he strode out of the room, seething with anger and ready to punch the wall.

Chapter Twenty One

It was the evening of Abigail's birthday and coming out party, which she had been waiting for forever, it seemed to her. On this momentous day, she was going to make her debut into London society. She had felt so excited about it in recent weeks, but now that it was here, the excitement had been replaced with sorrow.

She should have been joyfully getting ready, putting on her new dress, having her hair styled in an especially grown-up fashion, putting on the diamond necklace, bracelet, and earrings her mother had put aside for her for the grand occasion. Instead, she was sitting in front of her dresser before the looking glass, sobbing her heart out.

Her young heart ached with sadness to think that neither her mother nor her father would be there to witness her formal entrance to womanhood. She felt utterly bereft on what should have been one of the happiest days of her life. She picked up the midnight-blue

velvet case containing the diamonds and hugged it to her chest.

“Mother, Father, I hope you’re up in heaven and that you can see me. You know I am seventeen today and that I am having my very own ball. I just wish … I wish you were here with me tonight. I miss you both so much, my dearest Mama and Papa,” she sobbed even louder, choking on the words.

She painfully recalled the morning of her sixteenth birthday, when her parents had presented her with the diamond jewelry set. She had been so happy, promising to wear it on her next birthday, at her coming out party. That morning, only a few short months ago, none of them could have ever dreamed what would happen to destroy their happiness.

She opened the case and carefully lifted out the diamond necklace. It glittered beguilingly in the candlelight. Her parents' last gift to her. All she had done before now was to admire it and, sometimes, try it on in her room in private.

She had promised to wear it in public for the first time on the night of her birthday, but now it merely reminded her of all she was missing. The party she had so looked forward to would be the worst kind of bittersweet moment!

She thought of the special treatment her mother especially would have lavished upon her on this special day. Her mother had had a habit of getting up early to pray especially for her children on their birthdays. She would have helped Abigail to dress up and style her hair, until she felt like a princess.

Now, all that was lost, snatched from her, never to be regained. She clasped the necklace tightly in her fist, laid her head on the vanity, and sobbed her heart out once more.

A sharp knock interrupted her. She hurriedly wiped her face clean and tried to hide the evidence of her tears. She put the necklace back in its case, adjusted her dress, which was tangled around her knees, and called out. “Who is it?”

“It’s Miss Emma, Abigail. I wanted to know if I can help you with anything.”

Abigail went to unlock the door and let Emma in, who at once noticed something was wrong.

“Abigail, my dear girl, what is it?” She instantly enfolded the young girl in her arms and held her close. The affectionate gesture was all that was needed for Abigail’s tears to reappear. She willingly nestled her head into Emma’s shoulder and sniveled. Emma said, gently rubbing her back. “Tell me, my darling, what is upsetting you so on your special day?”

“That is just it, Miss Emma, it is my special day … but the most important people ... are not here. And I miss them so much.” She burst into fresh sobs.

“I understand. Come, let us sit on the bed,” Emma said, guiding the girl to the bed, where they sat down, Abigail still enfolded in Emma’s arms. “There, there, my dear. We should have talked about this

sooner, don't you think? We have all been going long so merrily, planning the dress, the party, the ball for your special birthday, and you must have been missing them terribly all along."

"Yes, and Grandmother doesn't like me talking about it. You are the only person I have told. You see, I keep thinking about the moments leading up to … what happened … the accident. Since then, well, everything feels very unreal, like a terrible nightmare that I will wake up from. But I can never wake up from it. It is real, and they are gone forever."

Emma let her cry, feeling it was best for Abigail to unburden herself at last. She was deeply touched and upset for the young girl. She remembered all too vividly how she had felt when she had lost her mother. It was an excruciating feeling of emptiness and frustration, so she had a good understanding of how Lady Abigail might be feeling. But, of course, she realized, with the day being her birthday and her coming out as well, the pain was bound to be magnified tenfold; the landmark event was not to be enjoyed with Abigail's beloved parents on hand to help her prepare and see her blossom into womanhood.

“I understand it must be hard for you, Abigail, and I am so sorry you have not been able to talk about how you have been feeling before now. You should have been able to do that, and to talk about your loss openly. It is perfectly natural for you to feel this way.”

“Do you think so, Miss Emma? I’m not going to be ungrateful.”

“Not at all. Any loving daughter would feel the same way.” Emma soothed, stroking Abigail’s hair tenderly. The girl’s sobs quieted a little. “I may have a little understanding of the situation, as I lost my mother too, a few years ago. I felt angry and lost. I remember wanting to talk about her all the time, but there seemed to be no one to listen, especially not my father. He was too wrapped up in his own grief. If I mentioned her name, he would leave the room or change the subject. It weighed heavily on me, having to keep it all inside. And do you know how I have found comfort?”

“No,” sniffed Abigail.

“Well, I look to the heavens, to the stars. I go out at night, or look through my chamber window, and gaze up at them. Up there, everything is so tranquil, so everlasting, and we are so small. I think of my mother as a star up there, always smiling down on me. And the good thing is, she is not alone; there are millions of other souls with her, for company. And, silly as it might sound, that thought has brought me a lot of comfort over the years.” She paused thoughtfully for a moment, before continuing. “So, you see, I have an inkling of how you might be feeling, although I did not lose both my parents at the same time, as you and Henry have. You have suffered greatly, I know.”

“Thank you, Miss Emma, thank you for telling me that. I knew you would understand. I want to think of them, I want to remember the happy times we had together, and I want to be able to talk about them whenever I like. I think I shall look up to the stars too from now on. I know my mother would have been here now, helping me to get ready, doing my hair, and look—” Abigail suddenly rose and went to the vanity, bringing back the velvet case containing the diamonds. “…This is what my parents gave me last birthday, and I have been saving them all year, as I promised to wear them tonight.”

“They are beautiful,” Emma said, looking at the diamonds admiringly. “Your parents must have known how wonderfully they would suit you. What a lovely gift to mark your coming out. They will be very proud that you are going to wear them tonight, and with your new dress too.”

Abigail regarded her queerly for a moment. Then, she said, “Yes, they will, won’t they? And I want them to be proud of me, and I want to justify their love and their special gift.” She seemed to think for a moment. “I think it is time for me to start getting ready. Will you stay and help me, Miss Emma?”

Emma went to embrace her again, then moved back to look Abigail in the eyes, smiling warmly. “It will be an honor, my dearest girl. We shall make your parents the proudest parents ever!” For the first time, Abigail smiled, her tears gone for the moment. Emma sat her at the vanity and began brushing out her hair in long, rhythmic strokes.

“You know, Abigail, when our parents die, and we think we have

lost them forever, that is not entirely true. When they create us, our little lives, and part of them, they are embedded in us. And no matter where we are or where we go, they will always be part of us. They will always be in our hearts."

"Yes, I suppose you are right. I have never thought about it like that before. I think I shall look to the stars too, Miss Emma. Thank you so much for your comforting words. I feel much happier inside now. I think I can go ahead and enjoy the party, as I'm sure now that Mama and Papa will be there in spirit if not in person." Abigail said, looking at Emma in the mirror.

"Very good. Now," Emma said, "shall we put your hair up? And where are the curling irons?" Sometime later, Abigail was admiring her sophisticated new hairstyle with delight. Emma had piled it up on top of her head, dividing it into sections and curling the ends of each one, then pinning the sections up into a mass of curls. She used pearl pins to match the pearls on Abigail's dress and tiara. Then, she fitted the tiara itself and pinned it securely. "We can't have it all tumbling down while you are dancing," she told Abigail laughingly. As a final

touch, she teased out a few tresses to frame Abigail's face, curling them into very becoming ringlets. "There we are. I think you are done!" cried Emma at last, standing back to admire her handiwork.

"Oh, Miss Emma! I absolutely adore it!" Abigail breathed in wonder. "I look so sophisticated. Is it really me?" she asked, staring at herself in the mirror.

"Well, I said you should be the bell of the ball, and this is only the start. "That was quite hard work. Do you think we should ring for some tea before we go on to the dress?"

"Go ahead, Miss Emma; I think that is an excellent idea." So, tea was brought up by Lucy, the maid, who also greatly admired Miss Abigail's hair. When Lucy had gone, the pair paused in their preparations for a reviving cup of tea. Emma was pleased to see Abigail looking in much better spirits and with a new look of determination about her, too.

After tea, they spent another hour getting Abigail dressed, from her silk stockings to the dress itself to the violet satin sash.

“The dress looks truly wonderful, Abigail, just as I thought,” Emma said admiringly, pleased to have played a part in helping Abigail to choose the style and colors.

“I still can’t quite believe that it is me,” said Abigail, turning slowly before the long pier glass, admiring her appearance.

“And you still have your matching gloves and reticule, and your satin dancing slippers, too,” Emma pointed out. “You will be a vision!” she joked.

“And all because of you, Miss Emma. I can’t thank you enough for everything, really,” Abigail cried joyfully. “But time is ticking by, and you must make ready for the party too. But before you go, I have something for you. I think you will like it.” Abigail reached under her bed and pulled out a pink dress box, which she handed to Emma along

with a warm smile and a grateful peck on the cheek.

"I saw you admiring the dress pattern and the fabric in the atelier. So, I wanted to get it for you as a surprise," she said.

"Oh, my goodness," Emma cried, "it certainly is a wonderful surprise. I am overwhelmed with joy and gratitude, Abigail. How thoughtful you are! Thank you. I shall go and get ready, and you may then admire me if you wish!" she joked, flushed with pleasure. Back in her room, she opened the box and carefully drew out the watered silk, emerald-green dress. It was exactly what she would have chosen for herself. And Abigail had not forgotten to add matching gloves and … satin dancing slippers.

Wondering how she would ever be ready in time, she was pleased when Lucy knocked at her door and offered to help. She accepted immediately, grateful for the maid's assistance. Lucy brushed out Emma's auburn hair into shining waves that fell down her back, with the front section pinned up and a few becoming ringlets framing her face. Next, she helped her into the lovely gown, and both women

stood back to admire the effect.

"You look beautiful," said Lucy, "the color really suits you, Miss Emma."

"Oh, I can't thank you enough, Lucy. I don't think I would have been ready in time without you." She squeezed the girl's hand gratefully. After Lucy had gone, Emma made the last of her preparations. Satisfied at last, she stepped out of her room. There she met Henry, looking like the confident young man he was growing into in his splendid new suit.

"There you are, Miss Emma," he said, grinning at her. "I must say, you look absolutely beautiful." Emma blushed with pleasure.

"And you look very smart indeed, Mister Henry."

"May I escort you downstairs, milady?" he said, offering his arm.

“I should be honored to have you escort me, fine sir,” Emma replied, taking his arm. With a final grin at each other, they paraded grandly down the hall.

Chapter Twenty Two

Robert waited patiently at the bottom of the staircase to formally escort his niece to her party. Several guests had already gathered in the great hall, where the company would mingle before going into a splendid supper served in the dining hall, followed by a ball.

The great hall, the dining hall, the ballroom, and all the spaces in between, had been lavishly decorated with white and gold garlands, coupled with great sheaves of pink tulips, as befitted the celebration of the birthday and formal introduction to society of young Abigail, the niece of a duke. It seemed as if a million candles lit the place, bathing it in golden light.

The whole event reminded Robert so much of when his sister Agnes had come out at age seventeen, just as her daughter was about to do that evening. It was a joyful occasion yet tinged with sadness and loss. He had loved Agnes very much and still missed her greatly. He

wondered how Abigail and Henry were feeling. His mother too, he supposed, must be feeling the loss, but it was difficult for him to feel any sympathy for her just then.

Robert smiled when he saw Abigail carefully descending the stairs. Dressed in a stunning lilac silk ball gown with matching gloves and slippers, diamonds on her wrist, in her ears, and around her neck, she looked grown-up and so much like his sister had at the same age, he had to swallow the lump which formed in his throat.

“My word, Abigail, you look so much like your mother, I was quite taken aback. In fact. I think I have something in my eye,” he joked, brushing a tear aside.

“Do I really, Uncle? How wonderful! Thank you for saying so.”

“Yes, I can remember her coming out ball as if it were yesterday. She was a beauty, too,” he said, offering Abigail his arm proudly.

“Thank you again, Uncle,” said Abigail beaming and blushing at the

same time. “You have never said I am beautiful before.”

“Ah, that was only because I was saving it up for tonight,” he said, squeezing her arm. “Well, are you ready to have the time of your life, dear niece?”

“I think I am. I am looking forward to it immensely. Especially the dancing, and I’ve been practicing my best curtsey,” Abigail said.

“Well, watch out for that Elsby fellow. I’ve already warned him to be on his best behavior,” he teased, making Abigail blush once more.

Just then, Emma appeared at the top of the staircase, arm in arm with Henry, and Robert caught his breath. My God, she’s stunning, he thought, taking in the emerald-green dress, which matched her eyes. The gown showed off her neat yet curvaceous figure to perfection.

But it was her glorious hair which caught his attention; though the front was fashionably styled with long ringlets, her back hair fell in shimmering auburn waves over her shoulders, a halo burnished by the

candlelight. He had to fight the urge to run up the stairs, take her in his arms, and kiss her deeply, sinking his hands into that soft, inviting mane. Abigail looked at him, a glint in her eye.

"Miss Emma looks beautiful too, doesn't she, Uncle," she said.

"Hmmm?" he said, absentmindedly, not taking his eyes off Emma as she came elegantly down the stairs toward them. For a few moments, everything around him seemed to fade, and he felt a falling sensation. She was special, this woman, and she affected him in ways he had never before experienced, that he wanted to go on experiencing. At last, she and Henry arrived in the great hall and crossed to join Robert and Abigail.

"Hello, Sis, you look nice, for a change," Henry joked, making Abigail smile and feign a swipe at his head.

"Well, I thought you might have dressed up a bit for my party, little brother. What is that you are wearing?"

“Well, you chose it, so if you don’t like it, it’s your own fault,” Henry said laughing.

Emma broke in, saying, “I think he looks terribly grown-up. Don’t you, Your Grace?” She turned to Robert, to find him staring at her.

“Er, yes, very smart young fellow, very smart indeed,” he told Henry, as if seeing him for the first time.

Blushing, Emma said, “Well, I see your party is already well underway, Abigail.”

“Yes, Miss Emma, and I am truly excited.” The two women shared a glance that Robert could not interpret, so his gaze returned to Emma.

“Miss Emma, may I say how simply beautiful you look tonight? What a lovely gown.”

Emma curtseyed, then grinned. “Thank you, Your Grace. It was a

gift from Abigail, for helping her to choose her party dress," she told him.

"She deserves it," Abigail put in, linking her other arm through Emma's. "I don't know where we would all be without Miss Emma," she added. How very true, Robert thought, feasting his eyes once more on the beautiful governess.

"Have you forgotten we have guests waiting?" the dowager, bedecked in dove grey satin, hurried toward them. "Most have arrived, and supper will be served soon. It is time for you to present Abigail before we dine. Do hurry up and get on with it, will you, Robert?" She looked at him piercingly; probably she had caught him admiring Miss Emma's appearance and was furious with him. He was irritated to see she had not mended her ways after his warning and ignored Emma rudely, except to flash her a contemptuous look as she hurried off again.

With Abigail on his arm, he began the short speech formally presenting her to society and opening the celebration.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, as most of you know, I am the Duke of Dalwater, and my family and I are truly delighted to see you all here today, to help us celebrate with great joy the birthday and coming out of a young lady very dear to our hearts.” There were cheers and applause, which delighted Abigail. Robert continued. “Without further ado, then it is my great pleasure to present to you … my beautiful niece, Miss Abigail Egerton!”

Amid further applause and cheers and cries of Happy Birthday, he raised Abigail’s hand high, and she curtseyed deeply to the company in all her glory. Almost at once, she was carried off by a giggling group of her friends, leaving Robert free to glance around to find Emma. He desperately wanted to be at her side, to talk to her., to tell her again and again how ravishingly beautiful she looked.

As he made his way through the cheerful throng in search of her, he paused many times to exchange cheerful greetings and pleasantries with his guests, until he suddenly found himself waylaid … by a determined looking Lady Beatrice.

“Good evening, my lord,” she said, smiling coyly and batting her eyelashes. As usual, he saw she was woefully overdressed. In her frills and furbelows, she reminded him rather of a fruit trifle. If only she were so inoffensive.

“Good evening, Lady Beatrice. I hope you are well and enjoying the party.”

“Don’t I look well?” she pouted, moving uncomfortably close to him.

“Er, yes, very well. Will you please excuse me, I am looking for someone, and I’m in rather a hurry. I am sure we will meet later.”

She moved to block his exit. “And you are looking exceptionally handsome tonight … if I may be so bold as to say so, my lord,” she simpered. Surprised at her boldness, he looked at her brittle beauty; her rouged cheeks and powdered skin. and he couldn’t help thinking how much he preferred Emma’s radiant complexion and naturally rosy cheeks, and her complete lack of artifice.

“You look rather bothered by something, my lord; can I help to take your mind off it?” She tried to sound caring, but Robert knew her pretense concealed a vicious nature.

“I assure you, Lady Beatrice, as I have already explained, I am merely in a hurry to find someone, so if you wouldn’t mind…” He moved away again, and this time she stood aside, pouting once more.

“Is it by any chance Miss Fletcher you are looking for?” she suddenly asked, taking him by surprise. She nodded, her eyes flashing. “I thought so. Well, she is over there, talking to the Duke of Elsby.” She inclined her head, and he looked over to see she was right, Theo and Emma were deep in conversation. He felt instantly relieved.

“Ah, thank you, it is the duke I am searching for.”

“Very well, I shall release you, But I’m sure we shall meet later, my lord … on the dance floor. Perhaps more than once, my lord?” she added with meaningful look that made his blood run cold. He knew

instantly what she meant: to dance with a young lady more than once was to be considered almost engaged. Over my dead body, he thought, at last making his escape. He glanced across the room to see his mother glaring at him. Clearly, she had seen him trying to get away from Lady Beatrice and was very unhappy with his conduct. He smiled at her sweetly, then made his way through the guests to where Theo and Emma were standing, with Henry at their side. They were laughing and joking, and Robert wondered what about.

"Ah, Theo ... here you are! Welcome, my friend, thank you for coming," he said, embracing Theo. Theo looked at him oddly.

"Yes, well, old chap, wouldn't have missed it for the world. Miss Abigail looks marvelous. Splendid turnout, eh? How are you? Is everything going smoothly?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, thank you. I see you and Miss Emma and young Henry here are enjoying yourselves."

"Yes, Uncle," said Henry, "we were talking about the time when we

went to the duke's estate to ride when Miss Emma first came. She told us about how she hid her fear of horses from us all because she was so embarrassed. Emma giggled sheepishly, a full-throated sound that set his body thrumming like a taut wire.

"I can confess it now that I have overcome my fear, mostly, at any rate," she joked, and everyone started laughing. "Well, they are such large creatures, aren't they? One never quite knows what they are going to do next."

Robert joined in the laughter but was genuinely surprised to learn of her fear. "I am so sorry, Miss Emma. I had no clue at all. And to think that I forced you to go. You must have been terrified!" he felt terribly guilty.

"Yes," she said, her eyes twinkling mischievously, "but I couldn't let Henry down, could I, Your Grace? So, I had to do my best to hide it. And it wasn't as bad as I thought. Now, I have learned to bribe the horses with sugar lumps simply."

“I taught her that,” Henry boasted proudly, and Emma beamed at him. It lit up her whole being, Robert thought. Her affection for the boy was clear to see.

“That’s my boy,” Robert joked, patting his nephew on the head.

“Not my hair, Uncle, please!” The boy complained comically.

Just then, the dowager called for the guests’ attention and announced that supper was served. Everyone was to make their way to the dining hall.

As the company seated themselves at table, Robert was both disappointed and annoyed to see that his mother had seated Emma with Henry near the bottom of the table, far away from him. Lady Beatrice, however, was only two chairs distant, just beyond Abigail, to his immediate left, and the dowager, to his right. He resigned himself to the fact, as he rose to his feet at the head of the table to make the

necessary toast in honor of Abigail, which drew more congratulatory cheers and clapping. At last, the company fell to dining.

Robert couldn't fault the dowager on her arrangements. Supper was splendid affair, with the guests enjoying, among other luxuries, roast quail and swan and suckling pig for the second of six courses. The ladies picked genteelly at their food, mindful of their restrictive corsets and the dancing to follow supper. The gentlemen, however, partook enthusiastically of the feast and drank lavishly too. It all made for merry company, except that Robert could not wholly enjoy it.

Throughout the meal, he found it almost impossible to keep his gaze from straying down to the far end of the table, where his nephew and the governess sat together, apparently deeply engaged with each other. Emma was clearly amusing Henry by making a game of pointing out the finer points of table etiquette for each course of such a grand occasion. It seemed to be a source of much laughter for the lad, and Robert was pleased by the improvement in his table manners. Why couldn't his mother see what a good influence Emma was on the children? As for the governess, the impact upon him of her

appearance did not lessen. Just looking at her from that distance made him grow warm. But more than that, the way she so devotedly cared for Henry impressed upon him that his heart's judgment of her was correct: She was born to be a good wife and mother.

Chapter Twenty Three

Emma looked up from her place next to Henry, whom she had assured had all the very nicest things on his plate. The boy had eyes bigger than his stomach, she thought with amusement. She had carefully explained to him that a little of each rich dish was sufficient unless he wished to be ill and miss the dancing. He had already made her promise him a dance, and she was looking forward to it. He was a credit to her teachings, and she was proud of him. She was thankful, too, as without him beside her, she would have been quite at sea among the other diners, with no other familiar faces nearby.

Of course, she could not have expected to be seated near the duke, as at family mealtimes, but nevertheless, she missed his comforting presence nearby. Whenever she could, she glanced up to the head of the table, trying not to be too obvious about it, and drank in how

particularly handsome he looked that evening in his formal dress. His beautiful ash-blond hair was neatly dressed, and his longtail coat and white breeches showed off his manly figure in a way that set her heart beating faster.

In fact, several times after looking at him, she had to fan her face with her napkin to cool her skin. She wondered if they might dance together at the ball, and the thought made her shiver with delightful anticipation. Still, in the meantime, the food was wonderful, and she was determined that both she and Henry would enjoy the party. Just then, as she looked up from her plate, she saw the duke looking at her. His eyes held hers, and he smiled. Emma felt herself suddenly blushing and tried to smile back without showing her inner turmoil.

After the guests were at last replete with fine puddings and wines, and supper was ended, the commencement of the ball was announced. Emma was delighted to see Abigail positively glowing as she moved among the guests making their way to the ballroom. She was proud she had been able to help the young woman overcome her sorrow and enjoy her special day, both for herself and on her parent's behalf.

The orchestra struck up a familiar country ballad as the ballroom filled. When that had finished, the Dowager Duchess stood up and announced it was time for Abigail's first dance. Lady Abigail waited, looking radiant, as her uncle approached her and held out his hand to escort her onto the dance floor. She looks quite grown-up, Emma thought, brushing a tear from her eye. Abigail would no longer need her governess for lessons in the schoolroom, but Emma hoped she would still prove a valuable friend to the girl. Abigail and her uncle swept around the floor gracefully to a pretty waltz tune, which showed Abigail's elegant dress off to great effect.

"She looks simply dazzling, your sister, don't you think, Henry?" she asked the boy, who remained with his arm linked through hers.

"Yes, she does. She looks … very grown-up and pretty. She won't be coming to lessons after this, will she, Miss Emma?" He sounded suddenly downcast. "I shall miss her. I suppose one of these lords will probably want to marry her after this, and then I shall hardly get to see her." Emma's heart went out to him, and she understood perfectly.

He was worried about what the future might hold as much as she was.

"Yes, it will be very strange not having to teach you both. But it means we will have more time to concentrate on the things *you* like best, Henry, and not, as you call it, on 'stupid girls' things,'" Emma went on, and Henry nodded his head, appreciating the fact.

He said, "And we can always invite Abigail to visit us, can't we? We can still have our picnics and special schoolroom treats? I'm sure she won't want to leave us behind altogether."

"She would miss you too much to do that."

"I hope so, Miss Emma. She is all that is left of my real family now, with my parents being gone," he said, making Emma's heart swell with monetary grief for him. She patted his hand gently.

"Well, my dear, I can tell you in strictest confidence that your sister feels exactly the same way about you. And as to family, of course, no one can ever replace your Mama and Papa, but your uncle is a

wonderful man who loves you, as does your grandmother … and me." He looked up at her with shining eyes.

"And I love you, Miss Emma. Now, when shall we have *our* first dance?" They both laughed at that, and, as the music was giving way to a jolly reel, she allowed Henry to escort her to the dance floor.

As she moved through the throng on Henry's arm, she noticed Abigail and the Duke of Elsby talking together. He was clearly asking her to dance. Emma was pleased, as she knew how happy Abigail would be about that! Was her heart skipping a beat in the same way Emma's did each time she glimpsed the duke? The young couple looked wonderfully matched, she thought, as they too made their way to the dance floor arm in arm, both wreathed in smiles.

Abigail was bound for great happiness, Emma was sure, if all turned out as the girl hoped with the object of her affections. She had no doubt Theo was also struck by the vibrant beauty Abigail had become. Emma felt a slight pang that she and her forbidden love, the duke, would never be able to enjoy the same happiness together.

As she and Henry joined the other couples in the swirl of the dance, she was impressed that Henry had learned the steps so well from his sister. He danced faultlessly, with the grace of a natural dancer. Emma had no doubt that, in a few years' time, the handsome boy would be breaking hearts on the dance floor himself.

As the set ended and they moved aside to make way for the next dance, Emma was taken off guard as the duke suddenly appeared beside them.

"My, Henry, your dancing fair puts me to shame," he said, smiling proudly at his nephew. "The young ladies are going to have to watch out for you, I can see," he teased. Henry giggled.

"But I had the best partner in Miss Emma," he said gallantly.

"Is that so?" his uncle said. "Then I beg to steal her from you for the next dance."

“Of course, Uncle, but only if she wants to. Miss Emma loves dancing, and she will make even you look well on the dance floor,” the boy quipped, getting his revenge for his uncle’s teasing. The duke laughed. “Besides,” said Henry, “I need a cold drink after all that!”

“Thank you for your good grace, sir,” the duke called, as the boy made his way to the refreshment table. Then, he turned to Emma and offered her his arm.

“Miss Emma, I should be delighted if you would have this next dance with me.”

Emma trembled, electricity running up her spine, until she felt herself to be positively glowing with both pleasure and embarrassment. How would she bear being held in the duke’s arms and whirled across the dance floor in front of all the other guests without betraying her feelings for him? Without giving in to the temptation to kiss those fine lips. But to be held in those arms once more, to breathe in his scent, to look into those beautiful eyes was what she wanted more than anything.

“Thank you, Your Grace, I, too, would be delighted,” she said, trying to keep her voice light and steady as she took his arm.

It was slow waltz. The duke rested one hand on Emma’s waist, while she rested hers on his shoulder. Then, they clasped their free hands above and drew close to each other, almost as close as they had been on that night in the garden. The music swelled, encompassing them in their own private world, where all outside concerns melted away, and they were at last free to be together as they moved gracefully across the floor in perfect unison.

How joyous it was to be held by him, to entwine her hand with his, to feel his warm breath on her skin, to look into his warm, hazel eyes and sway as one to the glorious music. Emma felt herself being swept away into a wonderful dream she wished never to end. All those sensations she had felt in his nearness since their first meeting united in her in the dance, and it was as if they suddenly made perfect sense.

This is what it feels like to be held by the man you love, she realized

with dizzying clarity. It was a feeling of ease and contentment, of carefree pleasure such as she had never before experienced.

Throughout the entire dance, not once did his eyes leave hers, and he smiled down at her constantly, his eyes sparking and seemingly filled with as much joy as she felt. They did not speak … it did not seem necessary. Yet there was a silent communication which she felt passed between them through their locked gaze that spoke deeply of strong attraction, of two matched souls drawing together in harmonious union.

When the dance finally ended, Emma felt she had been changed forever. She knew instinctively she would never love another man. The duke was in her heart for good, despite the fact they could never be together.

Once she had acknowledged that to herself, she felt more at peace. She could love him without anything in return except to be near him.

Chapter Twenty Four

At last, Robert thought triumphantly, I have her in my arms again … and it feels so right! From the moment he had seen Miss Emma and Henry leaving the dance floor, he had been determined that her next dance would be with him.

He immediately made his way through the other guests near the dance floor, intent on getting to her before any other man could ask her to dance. From the moment she took his arm to the first strains of music, a slow waltz he was gratified to note, nothing else existed for him but Emma Fletcher.

He felt high exultation such as he had never felt before to have this comely woman on his arm, to be free to hold her close, entwine his hand with her warm, delicate one, to gaze unhindered at her lips, her eyes, her porcelain cheek, and to smell the delicious lemon scent of her hair. It was a heady perfume that had him standing taller, feeling

stronger and more masculine than he had in a long time.

When he placed his hand on her waist and felt its soft curves, it was all he could do to fight down his almost overpowering physical desire to make her his own. Despite that, dancing the deliciously slow waltz with her was a liberating feeling completely novel to him. It was almost dizzying to know that, for a few minutes at least, she was his and nobody, not his mother, not the *ton*, could do anything to stop him enjoying being close to this perfect little woman whom he … yes, he owned it … he loved Emma Fletcher.

For the short, dream-like time of the dance, he was free to gaze into those depthless green eyes without interruption. Emma never acted coyly, she never fluttered her eyelashes at him, or enticed him with her eyes, beautiful as they were. Her face was exquisitely fresh and natural, full of health and vitality. Pressing her small hand in his larger one was one of the chief delights of the evening for him. He wanted to keep it there forever, caged like a little bird. She was his, he was sure of it when he saw the shining passion in her answering gaze, just as he had that night in the garden.

Nothing, no prior experience of being close to Isabel, of kissing her, had prepared him for the experience of holding close this auburn-tressed angel. Oh Lord, if only he could kiss those soft, beautiful lips!

It was with the greatest reluctance that he relinquished Emma as the waltz came to an end. Was it his imagination or had he seen regret in her smile, felt the way her hand had lingered on his shoulder a little longer than it should have?

He sensed the experience had changed him forever somehow, he felt, bigger, stronger, the urge to protect her was almost overwhelming. The necessity to let her go and return to the normal world filled him with regret. And he was almost sure she felt the same.

As soon as they left the dance floor, Robert escorted Emma to the refreshment table. While she was with the Duke of Dalwater it was

unlikely that any other man would be so bold as to ask her to dance, which suited him fine, he thought, slightly shocked at himself for relying on his rank to get his desire. But, as he fetched champagne for them both, he was stunned to find a profound change had taken place in their relations during the dance.

There was a deep sense of relaxation, that no further striving was necessary to be able to converse without blushing, stammering, or feeling hot and awkward in each other's company. In fact, it was as if they had been together forever, happy and content to simply be by themselves, exchanging news about the simple things that were important in their shared life. He found it was a restful feeling, and he reveled in it.

Of course, he still wanted to hold her tightly to him and shower her with affection, he couldn't think of a time when he wouldn't want to do that. But much of the strain had dissipated, and they had moved onto a new footing, it seemed. It was if, he thought, there had been a silent, mutual agreement between themselves that, yes, they loved each other. Now, all that had to be dealt with was how they were

going to go about dealing with the practical obstacles to their partnership.

They enjoyed a glass of champagne in cheerful contentment. They admired Abigail and Elsby as a couple and discussed with much laughter what it would mean should the young couple dance twice.

Then, they talked about how Henry was turning into a fine young man and how proud they were of him. Their minds fell into happy accord, just as their bodies had during the dance. All previous tension between them vanished. They conversed with all the familiarity of an old happily married couple. But the happy state was not to last.

Before a quarter of an hour had passed of being in this blissful bubble, it was rudely broken into by the arrival of the dowager, with the Duchess of Irrisoll and the Lady Beatrice by her side. The old woman shot a look of utter disdain at Emma, who, in her altered frame of mind, met it with a calm smile.

“Robert, it is time you ceased allowing Miss Fletcher to monopolize

your presence," she chided.

Robert turned to her serenely and replied, "Hello, Mother. Lady Seymour, Lady Beatrice, I do hope you are enjoying the party. The orchestra is really first rate. I very much enjoyed the last dance with Miss Fletcher, and now we are sharing this excellent champagne. I invite you to do the same." Emma looked away to hide her smile, while the dowager looked as if steam might come out of her ears at any moment.

However, good breeding prevented it, and she said, "Well, now that is done, it is time to honor your promise to dance with Lady Beatrice." Robert effected surprise.

"I'm sure I don't remember making such a promise. How very remiss of me. As you can imagine, I am rather weary at this moment, having only recently retired from the dance floor. Perhaps Lady Beatrice would be kind enough oblige one of her doubtless numerous would-be partners for this set?" He spoke with perfect aplomb.

Emma thought the dowager was about to have a fit, and Lady Irrisoll looked bewildered at the very suggestion that anyone, even a duke, would reject her daughter as a dance partner. Lady Beatrice, however, with more grit, had daggers in her smile.

"The duke is correct. I have indeed very many other partners awaiting my favor, but I feel I should at last *oblige* his lordship by meeting his invitation to dance. I would not want him to feel slighted by my having excluded him," she said with a sweet and deadly smile at Robert. Robert took a deep breath, clearly steeling himself.

"How very kind of my lady," he said stiffly, then turned to Emma. "Please do excuse me for a short while, Miss Fletcher. As you see, I have an obligation to fulfill." Emma nodded graciously. The duke offered a triumphant Lady Beatrice his arm, and they left for the dance floor together, where a new set was about to begin. Fortunately, Emma observed, the tune was not a waltz. The two older ladies flicked their fans rather menacingly, and left Emma standing alone, with dark mutterings passing between them.

As he escorted Lady Beatrice to the dance floor, Robert wondered if Emma felt as angry as he did about having been parted in such an underhand way. He couldn't help but show his deep resentment toward the young, sly woman beside him in his stiff bearing and monosyllabic answers to her shallow, provocative questions. They were clear attempts at flirtation, which he ignored.

As the dance began, and he thanked the Lord it wasn't a waltz, so he wouldn't have to hold the little vixen close, his anger began to cool. Such was the deep understanding he felt he had gained with Emma, he found he no longer regarded Lady Beatrice as much of a threat. In fact, she was a rather pathetic figure, grasping, shallow, and superficial, and she would never change.

She would find a husband as equally shallow as herself, he was sure, but it damned well wasn't going to be him. His mother could hardly be more disappointed in him than she already was. Theo was right; she had had her life. Why should he sacrifice his own happiness merely to satisfy her selfish whim? No one could drag him up the aisle to marry Lady Beatrice, so what was there to fear?

All these thoughts ran through his mind as he went mechanically through the dance steps opposite Lady Beatrice. When they met in the dance, she would say something meant to entice him, but he shrugged off her remarks with a smile, and simply carried on, waiting for the music to end and his time-wasting torment to be over.

Then, he would go and find Emma again. And he would ask her to dance again. And if she accepted, well, then he and everybody else, including his mother and the Seymours would know where things stood.

He looked around the room to the refreshment table, but Emma was not there. His heart sank a little. Probably, she had gone to find Henry, he reasoned. He scanned the dance floor. No, he couldn't see her dancing with anyone, for which he felt relieved.

He was so preoccupied with his own thoughts, he hardly noticed the time passing and was surprised when the dance ended. He politely escorted a subdued Lady Beatrice from the dance floor and was about

to make his exit, when he was buttonholed by her father and another old lord. The gentleman had been an old friend of his father and had known Robert as a boy, so, much to his frustration, he was stuck with them in boring conversation for some time.

Not long after that, at midnight, the ball ended, and he was forced to do his duty as host and personally see off all the guests. When he had finished and looked for Emma, much to his frustration, he could not find her anywhere.

Chapter Twenty Five

Emma woke the next morning to the sun shining into her room. She stretched lazily, glad there was to be a day of rest following the party and, therefore, no school lessons. She wondered how Abigail and Henry were that morning.

Most likely, they weren't even awake yet, for it still felt quite early. She imagined they would both be terribly tired after the celebration and late night.

Conscious that, if she wished, she might stay in bed all day, she knew she didn't want to miss seeing the duke at breakfast. She wanted to see how he would behave toward her after their dance last night.

It had been a very special experience for her, and she needed to see

his eyes to know if it had been the same for him or had meant nothing other than taking pity on the governess.

She frowned, remembering watching him dance with Lady Beatrice. He had seemed unwilling to do so at first, and she had to admit his frosty reception of the notion had been very amusing at the time. Still, she felt unsure of herself when in the company of the dowager and Lady Beatrice. They never failed to remind her of her lowly station as a commoner and governess, a mere employee of the household.

She had been too far away to see if the duke seemed to be enjoying dancing with Lady Beatrice, but Lady Beatrice had certainly seemed to. She had smiled brilliantly all the way through, as though she knew Emma was watching and wanted to hurt her. And it had hurt her. She almost dreaded facing the duke that morning.

What if she saw nothing in his eyes? What if the passion she thought she had seen in them the previous evening had all been in her imagination? She sighed, but determined to face the truth without delay, got out of bed and began her toilette to make herself

presentable to join the family at breakfast.

Just as she was about to leave her chamber, there was a tap on the door.

“Come in,” she said, expecting Henry or Abigail to appear. But, no, it was Lucy who entered, her face a picture of woe.

“What is it, Lucy dear?” Emma asked, going to the maid and taking her hand.

“Oh, Miss Emma,” said the girl in obvious distress, “I wish I weren’t the one sent with such a horrible message to deliver.”

Emma frowned. “Whatever it is, it is hardly your fault, Lucy. Please, just tell me what it is.”

Lucy sniffed back tears. “It’s the Dowager Duchess, Miss Emma. She said I’m to tell you that your presence is not required at the breakfast table this morning, or until further notice.”

Emma’s heart sank. The dowager. Trust her to be vindictive. Cleary, she had seen her dancing with the duke and getting on well with him. This was her way of putting a stop to any cordial relations between the duke and the governess, or any members of her illustrious family, come to that.

It would not be long, she felt sure, before she was excluded from family dinners either. But it was to be expected. Who did she thing she was, getting above her station? The schoolroom was her domain. She was an employee, nothing more.

“She can be a mean old lady when she wants, the dowager,” Lucy put in, as if trying to comfort Emma.

Emma tried to brush it off. “Well, it was only at the duke’s request that I was invited to attend at all, so it is to be expected.”

“I’ll bring your breakfast up to you, shall I, Miss Emma?” Lucy asked.

“No, that is alright, Lucy. Thank you, but I shall come down to the kitchen and get it myself presently.” Lucy smiled and squeezed her hand.

“You know you’re always welcome down there, Miss Emma. You have many friends amongst us servants.”

Lucy returned the squeeze, then let go of Lucy’s hand. “That is good to know. Now, you go back to your work, and I shall see you later.”

When Lucy had gone, Emma stood by the window looking out at the lovely grounds for a few minutes, coming to terms with the new arrangement. With heavy heart, she wondered just how long she was

going to be allowed to stay at Dalwater, now the dowager seemed to have her firmly in her sights.

The thought of what she would lose if she had to leave made her feel sick. At last, with no appetite but feeling she should at least have some toast and a cup of tea, she went down to the kitchen.

Later that morning found Emma in the drawing room with Abigail and Henry, both of whom were looking remarkably bright, considering the late night they had had. Abigail was serenely painting a landscape scene of a Greek temple.

Henry, who had now grown quite keen on arithmetic, was patiently working his way through a page of sums Emma had prepared for him. Emma worked on her lesson notes. The duke and dowager were nowhere to be seen, and, as neither of the children mentioned breakfast, she saw no reason to do so either.

They had talked a little about the party and agreed it had been wonderful. However, it seemed to Emma that both children, though

happy to discuss it in general, were intent on keeping their thoughts private for the moment. Or perhaps they were simply tired. Whatever the case, she thought she should be prepared to receive confidences at any time, should either of them find her alone.

It would probably be bedtime for Henry when she would read to him. As to Abigail, she had quite a good idea of what was occupying that young lady's mind after her dance with the handsome Duke of Elsby.

Their tranquil work was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Abigail absently, clearly intent on her painting. The butler, Mr. Hughes, entered.

"Miss Emma, a letter has arrived for you by messenger. The boy is waiting for a reply," he said, holding out the letter to her. She rose to her feet, instantly worried. It could only be from her father or Elizabeth at Whitehaven. And the fact it had been sent by special messenger did not bode well. With trembling fingers, she opened it

and read the contents, her face growing pale.

"It is my father. He has been taken suddenly ill. My sister asks me to return home at once." She looked to the butler. "Would you please ask the boy to wait a few minutes, while I go to my room and write a note for return, Mr. Hughes? And would you be good enough to arrange for me to be driven into the village so I may catch the two o'clock coach?"

"I am sorry to hear that news, Miss Emma, I hope it is nothing too serious. I shall make the arrangements immediately. Lucy will help you to pack."

"Thank you so much for your kindness, Mr. Hughes. Please say goodbye to everyone for me. I have no idea when I shall return," she said, her voice wavering. *Or if I shall be able to at all.* Mr. Hughes bowed and left the room. All at once, Abigail and Henry surrounded her, each taking one of her hands and pressing them to comfort her.

“I am very sorry about your father, Miss Emma. I hope he gets better soon, as we need you here.” Henry said, his voice full of concern. Her heart went out to him.

“Yes, your poor father. Let us hope he recovers his health shortly. Please don’t worry about us, Miss Emma, we know you have to go, and we will wait for you return. You will write to us and let us know what you intend to do, won’t you?” asked Abigail, tears in her eyes.

Emma hugged them both. “You are both very kind,” she said, almost breaking down at the thought of leaving them. But her father must come first, and poor Elizabeth would be coping alone. It was imperative she leave for Whitehaven at once.

Chapter Twenty Six

Emma felt very sad. She had no idea that morning when she awoke that she would be going back to Whitehaven that day, not for a holiday but because of her father's ill health. It was his heart, was all Elizabeth had written in her letter, and that Emma must come at once, for he was very low.

It seemed his health has been poor for some time, and paying for treatment had become too expensive for Elizabeth to manage on the little they had and what Emma managed to send home from her wages. That meant, Emma thought, her heart sinking further, that Elizabeth had probably discovered the dire state of the family finances, which Emma had taken such pains to hide from her. Poor Elizabeth! She would not be coping well, Emma feared.

As soon as she had dashed off a note for Elizabeth telling her she was on her way home and delivering it to one of the footmen to give

to the messenger boy, Emma hurried back to her room to pack. Lucy came up to help her, and it was all finished very quickly. She realized she did not have much to take. She left the pink gown and the emerald-green silk, both presents from Abigail, in the wardrobe. She figured she would not need them.

Once she was packed, she left Lucy to direct the footman in bringing her trunk down to the dogcart, ready to drive to the nearby village for the coach stop. Before leaving, she hurried downstairs to look for the duke, wanting to tell him in person why she was leaving in such haste. But he was nowhere to be found, and time was running out.

She realized she should have asked Mr. Hughes about the duke's whereabouts and ran back down to the kitchen to find him. He was in his pantry, decanting wine.

"Oh, Miss Emma, he left early to go to town on business this morning. I have no idea where he is. He did say he would be back in time for dinner, though. Would you like to leave him a note? Of course, I shall tell him what has happened, but you might like to leave

word yourself if you have time," he kindly suggested.

Emma frowned. "And what about the dowager, is she here?"

"She is out too, I'm afraid, having tea with some friends in town."

"Just as well," muttered Emma, who was sure the old lady would be pleased to see her go. She hesitated. "I don't think I have time to write His Grace a note, Mr. Hughes, not if I am to make the two o'clock coach. Would you be good enough to explain the circumstances to him and tell him that I will write to advise him of my situation as soon as possible, please?"

"Of course. Please do not worry yourself about it, Miss Emma, I will see he understands." On impulse, she rushed forward and kissed the old butler on the cheek, leaving him in stunned surprise.

“Thank you, Mr. Hughes. Thank you all for being so kind and helpful. Now, I must go…”

On the long and tedious journey from Dalwater to Whitehaven, which lasted almost a week and entailed many stops and changes, Emma had a lot of time to think and an awful lot to think about.

Everyone, the servants and Abigail and Henry had all come to see her off and wish her a safe journey, offering to pray for her father’s speedy recovery. It took all the strength she had not to break down completely in front of them. No one seemed happy to see her go, especially in such sad circumstances, but she wanted to present a good front for Henry in particular. She would worry most about his welfare while she was gone. And she had no idea if she would ever be back.

That was one of the things that tore her apart throughout the long jolting hours on the road, and the restless nights spent at the endless inns where the coaches would break their journey each evening. It

was difficult enough seeing Dalwater recede into the distance but leaving the children behind was almost too painful to bear. The three of them had grown so close.

All she could do was hope and pray her father would recover quickly, and she would be able to return to them before anything happened to jeopardize their happiness. While Abigail was older and likely would be courting before too long, which would remove her from harm's way, Henry was all too vulnerable to the whims of his grandmother.

If she should succeed in getting the duke to marry the odious Lady Beatrice, Emma dreaded to think what lengths she might take to get Henry out of her way.

As the journey progressed, she thought about her father and what might be wrong with his heart. She had not seen him for many weeks, and he had seemed tired out then. No doubt, the financial worries had brought on this attack, whatever it was. Should she have left at all to take up her position at Dalwater? Had she been selfish leaving

Elizabeth to cope all alone, knowing something like this could happen? But it had seemed the only way to protect Elizabeth from the grim truth; their capital had gone, and they had very little else to support them. It had been a difficult choice, but one she had been forced to make.

And then, she almost didn't want to think about it, but she forced herself, there was the duke and her love for him. Now, she would probably never know how he really felt about her. In fact, she realized with horror, their time together at the ball could very well be the last time she saw him.

The notion caused her to break down in fresh tears every time she thought of it. Her heart was sore and heavy whenever she imagined never seeing that dear, handsome face ever again, except in her dreams. She simply could not imagine loving another man.

She chided herself for being so stupid. Only a silly schoolgirl would have imagined there could have been any future for her and the duke. Her heart told her there had been a strong attraction between them,

but many a nobleman had taken advantage of a governess or maid to amuse himself in such cases.

She was deluding herself to think it had been more than that. In fact, she was lucky to leave with her reputation intact. Look what had happened to Lady Isabel! Besides, the dowager would have seen to it that nothing came of his attraction to her.

Nevertheless, Emma felt almost ill when she thought of the duke wed to Lady Beatrice, a feeling she slowly came to understand was jealousy. She punished herself for her stupidity by resigning herself to caring for her father and becoming an old maid in Whitehaven.

Emma finally arrived at Whitehaven after five days of traveling. It was dusk when she reached the house in a rented cart. The driver handed down her trunk, and she thanked him gratefully and tipped him a shilling. Weary and travel stained, she let herself in to the house and went straight to the kitchen.

“At last!” cried her sister on seeing her, rushing up to embrace her,

relief on her face. “Thank goodness, Emma. I was worried you wouldn’t arrive before father…” she trailed off, looking deeply despondent. Emma hugged her close, suddenly unable to prevent fresh tears bursting from her eyes. She felt bone-weary and all she wanted to do was go to bed and stay there. But she had responsibilities to see to, and so she pulled herself together as best she could.

“Oh, Elizabeth, I am sorry it has taken me so long to get here! I thought the journey would never end. I am so glad to see you. How is father? How are you, dear Sister?”

“I am as you see me, Emma,” Elizabeth said, and Emma looked at her younger sister. She appeared much older than when Emma had left, her face pale and careworn. “Father is very poorly,” Elizabeth continued. “The doctor says it was some kind of failure of the heart, the blood is not pumping through it properly or something like that. There is little to be done for him but to keep him warm and comfortable. He can eat only light dishes, that is when he eats at all. He has some medicine to take which eases it somewhat, but the doctor is not at all hopeful he will make a recovery. Emma,” she said

suddenly, her face contorting with worry, “I fear it may not be long before we lose him.”

“There, there, Elizabeth, you are an angel to have looked after him so well by yourself. I am here now, and we can do it together. I should like to see him.”

“He is sleeping now, the medicine helps with that, but by all means go up. I shall make tea and bring it up to you.” Emma went up to her father’s chamber to find him deep in slumber. His face looked pale and old on the pillow, the face of an old man not long for the world. She couldn’t hold back a sob. He had done the best he could as a father, and she had many fond memories of him and their mother from childhood.

But her worry over the financial failures he had left them facing dogged her. Without her wages and with their money almost gone, what would become of them? She felt awful for thinking that she and Elizabeth would be better off if he died. At least the house could be sold, and the proceeds invested so they could live.

She stayed with her father for an hour, drinking the tea which Elizabeth had brought up for her, but he showed no sign of waking. She hoped he would wake on the morrow, and she would be able to talk to him about the situation. In the meantime, she had money in her purse that would cover the doctor's bill, which would at least put Elizabeth's mind at rest … for the moment.

Later that evening, she sat in the parlor and tried to compose a letter to the duke. She felt as though she should write two different letters, one to His Grace, the other to Robert. It was well past dinner time at Dalwater, and he would be at home by now.

What would he be thinking about her sudden departure, if he were thinking about her at all? After much thought and many false starts, she finally completed a satisfactory draft, blotted it, sealed in in an envelope, and left it for posting in the morning.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Robert returned to Dalwater Manor in the late afternoon after leaving early to oversee some business matters in town. It had been hard to get up early enough to leave on time, as he had been so late getting to bed. All day, apart from when he had been dealing with his business, he had been thinking about the night before and dancing with Emma. In fact, all he could think about was Emma.

He had breakfasted in his room and had regretted having to leave so early for town that he had missed seeing her at breakfast. He longed to see her again, to make sure he hadn't been imagining things; that there really was special connection between. But even if there was, he thought, he spirits suddenly drooping, what was he going to do about it?

The house seemed quiet, and Robert wandered through the downstairs rooms, hoping to see Emma, but she was nowhere to be

found. He checked the library, but she wasn't there either. There were no lessons today, he knew, so she probably wasn't in the schoolroom. He went to Abigail's chambers and knocked. There was no answer, and when he opened to door, the room was empty. Henry wasn't in his chamber either. Puzzled, he approached Emma's door, knocking gently. If she was inside sleeping after the late night, he didn't want to wake her, so he left, hoping to see her at dinner.

Finally, he went downstairs to his study, where he poured himself a large brandy and drank it in one swallow. He felt tired yet restless and frustrated. He paced about aimlessly, trying to think of where she could be. And where were the children? Had they all gone into town together perhaps?

There was a knock at the door and his heart leapt. It could be Emma! He rushed to open the door and was disappointed to see Hughes standing outside looking grave.

"What is it Hughes? And where is Miss Fletcher?" he asked brusquely.

“I’m afraid Miss Emma had some bad news earlier today, Your Grace. That is what I have come to tell you.”

“Bad news? What bad news?” His senses were immediately on the alert. “Is she alright? Has anything happened to her?” he demanded.

“No, Your Grace, but to her father. He has been taken very ill. Her sister sent her a letter asking her to go home at once. She left just before luncheon. She took the two o’clock coach from the village.”

“Good Lord,” Robert exclaimed. How could all this have happened while he had been away only for a few hours!

“She was very sorry that she didn’t have time to leave you a note herself, Your Grace, so she asked me to tell you the news. She said she will write to let you know the situation as soon as she arrives at Whitehaven.”

“But that will take days!” Robert exploded, now at the end of this tether with anxiety for Emma. To think of her in some horrible coach for days on end; it was unbearable. His feeling of powerlessness was almost unendurable.

“I’m afraid so, Your Grace. It was all such a terrible hurry. She was determined to catch that coach, you see.”

“But why on earth didn’t she take a carriage?”

“She did not feel she ought to, Your Grace. You know Miss Emma. She is very proper about such things. She said she had no right or permission.”

Robert groaned and ran his hand through his hair. “But why didn’t my mother give her permission?”

“The dowager was out too, Your Grace. And I feel I should say, the children are most upset about her leaving. Both were in tears. They are very fond of her, you know, Your Grace.”

“Yes, Hughes, thank you … I know that. We are all very fond of Miss Emma. Well, where are the children now?”

“The Duke of Elsby came, Your Grace, and took them out in his carriage to try to cheer them up, he said.”

“Well, that is some relief, at least. They will be safe with Elsby, and if anyone can cheer them it’s him.” He paused, rubbing his chin, wondering what he could do to help Emma. How was he going to manage without her? He wanted so badly to tell her how much he loved her, adored her, wanted to marry her. But what if she never came back? “Alright, Hughes, thank you for telling me, and for making the arrangements for Miss Emma.”

Hughes was just leaving when the dowager appeared in the doorway. “Ah, there you are, Robert,” she said. He looked up and was horrified to see Lady Beatrice standing behind her. His heart sank to his boots. Oh Lord, this is all I need just now.

“Mother, Lady Beatrice,” he nodded, unsmiling.

“Robert, I want you to escort Lady Beatrice today during the promenade hour to Hyde Park. She wishes to hear the band playing there today.”

His patience had worn too thin. “I am afraid I cannot, Mother. I am otherwise engaged. I beg your pardon, Lady Beatrice. Another time perhaps.” He said tersely, pleased to see the surprised look in the young woman’s eyes. His mother glowered at him.

“Then cancel that engagement, Robert. Lady Beatrice is expecting you to accompany her.” That was too much for Robert. “It’s shall not, Mother. And if you are so concerned about Lady Beatrice’s entertainment, why do you not accompany her to Hyde Park yourself? Now, I must kindly ask you, ladies, to vacate my study forthwith. Good day to you both.” He hustled the shocked pair out of the room and slammed the door behind them. Then, he turned the key in the lock, poured himself another brandy, threw himself in a chair, and sobbed.

An hour later, he heard a carriage in the drive. Wearily he got up and looked out of the window. As he had hoped, it was Elsby's carriage, and Abigail was just stepping out of it, followed by Henry, then the duke himself.

Thank the Lord, Robert thought, tidying himself up and trying to pull himself together around the great empty hole he felt had opened up inside him.

He unlocked the study door and went out to greet them. There was no sign of his mother or Lady Beatrice. He had no idea what he was going to say to the children, but he was very glad for his old friend's company.

He bitterly berated himself for not being there to support both them and Emma earlier that day. If he had been, then, he could have taken charge of the crisis with her father, so she wouldn't have had to deal with it all on her own. He could have arranged proper transport, doctors, whatever was needed. Now he was too late, and she was

gone!

Chapter Twenty Eight

The days following Emma's departure dragged by for Robert miserably slowly. And he knew it was the same for Abigail and Henry. Perhaps even worse, he thought, for they had lost their parents so recently and Emma had brought them slowly back to life. Now, they have lost her too, at least for the time being. And she might never return.

Certainly, his mother would be pleased if she did not return. She seemed to have no feeling at all as to what her loss meant to the children. He wondered how she could be so cold and unfeeling.

He had tried to spend as much time with the children as he could, sharing the fact he was missing Miss Emma's bright company too, and listening to them talk about how happy she had made them. They bonded in their mutual sorrow, agreeing that the house did not seem the same without her. It felt cold and depressing.

In an effort to keep them busy, Robert rode out with them each morning and took them over to Elsby's as often as possible. Theo was happy to see them. He and Robert supervised Henry's fencing lessons, and Abigail brought her sketch book and kept herself occupied with making lovely drawings of the landscapes, which she said she intended to send to Miss Emma.

In fact, both children had already written letters ready to send to their governess, which they added to daily, enclosing any little objects they thought she would find interesting.

The only thing that consoled them was the thought that she was suffering more than they were, and they prayed each morning and night for Mr. Fletcher's recovery.

When he had time to reflect, which as far too often, Robert felt guilt for done having done anything practical to help Emma in the situation she was in. She had confided in him the family's precarious financial position, how she had discovered her father's investment losses and

sought work as a governess to support him and her younger sister.

How valiant she is, he thought, making such a sacrifice when she could have simply stayed at home until the money ran out, letting them all suffer. He compared her to Lady Beatrice, who did not come out of it at all well.

And now this wonderful woman, this kind and loving person, had been taken away from them just as she had made herself indispensable to their hearts. He berated himself further for not having done more to protect Emma from his mother and Lady Beatrice. He should have made sure she felt comfortable and secure in the house rather than letting his mother treat her so badly.

His mother had talked incessantly about him marrying Lady Beatrice since Emma had first arrived, and Emma had no reason not to believe it was true. And the two women had behaved horribly to her the entire time, probably making her believe she would be dismissed if it happened. Had that been the sadness he had seen in her eyes that night in the garden? Oh, what an idiot he was!

One thing puzzled him greatly. What was it his mother had against Emma? She claimed it was because he needed a wife to help him raise the children. But it was perfectly normal for parents to employ governesses to educate and care for their children, so her objection held no water. If he had employed another governess, would the old lady have behaved differently? His mother was a stickler as an employer, to be sure, but he had never witnessed her maltreating any other servant as she had treated Emma. And she showed no remorse at all. It seemed almost personal, and it puzzled him greatly, as he now realized it must have puzzled and tormented Emma.

He and his mother had avoided each other since the day Emma had gone when she had tried to force him to escort Lady Beatrice to Hyde Park. They had not exchanged so much as a word.

She wouldn't even look at him, and it suited him just fine. He was glad to be free of her commands and machinations for a while. That is another thing. Why did she have such a bee in her bonnet about Lady Beatrice? What was so special about her?

His mother's sudden rush to marry him off was also perplexing. A man, a duke at that, could never be too old to get married, surely, so what was she about? He had merely wanted to take his time, to marry only when he met the right lady, someone as sweet as Emma. She would make any man an excellent wife and be a wonderful mother to his children. The workings of his mother's mind were a complete mystery to him in these matters. As he evidently was to her.

Relief came only on the seventh day since Emma's departure when a letter arrived from her. Hughes brought it to him in his study, and as soon as the butler had gone, he tore it open, pulling out the letter in his haste to read what she had to say.

Your Grace,

I know this letter will reach you some days after my departure, and I apologize for that, but the delay cannot be helped because of the great distance between us. Mr. Hughes will have explained the circumstances of my having to leave so hastily without talking to you first. I apologize for

having done so, but I am sure you can appreciate the urgency of the matter.

The fact is that my father was suddenly taken ill about a week before I left Dalwater Manor. His heart suffered some attack that left him gravely ill and, my sister and I fear, close to death. A local doctor is treating him, but his condition is not improving. However, there is some hope for a recovery, it seems, and we have been advised to have a specialist in heart problems see him.

However, as you know, our financial position is not a strong one, so we have been obliged to put that off for the time being. Bearing that in mind and being unable to say if I shall be able to return to my position at Dalwater at present, I must therefore ask you if you would be so kind as to consider forwarding any outstanding wages to me at your earliest convenience. That would assist us greatly in paying the medical bills until I can find employment locally to provide a steady income. I would be very grateful if you could see your way to arranging that for me.

I am greatly concerned about the children's welfare in my absence, and I

hope sincerely that it will not be too long before I see them again. I miss them terribly, as I have come to care for them very much. I beg you to ensure that Henry is encouraged in his outdoor activities and his arithmetic practice. He shows great promise.

Your Grace, please pay special attention to Miss Abigail. Though a joyous occasion, her birthday and coming out of the party were also a sad reminder that she lost her parents a mere twelve months ago. Therefore, it has been a bittersweet time for her.

Both the children look up to you, as you are a great example of kindness to them. I beg you again to give them as much support as possible through the kind and gentle reassurance and encouragement. I should like your permission to write to them while I am away, so they know I miss them and am thinking of them daily.

I hope to let you know my position regarding my return to your employer within the next week if that is your wish and you are kind enough to allow me that time. In the interim, I would like to thank you for your many kindnesses to me while I was at Dalwater. They are much appreciated and

treasured.

May God bless you and keep you all safe,

Your affectionate servant,

Miss Emma Fletcher.

Later that evening, the family dined together. He had allowed the children into his study to read the letter from Emma. There had been tears, but he thought it best they know the facts of the situation and that it would be as a comfort to read of their beloved governesses' concern and care for them while she was away, despite her own troubles. It seemed to have reassured them somewhat, and they had finished their letters to her to be posted in the morning. Being able to do something to bridge the distance between them and Emma had seemed to provide some sense of reassurance that all was not lost.

He had also decided he would read to Henry in the evenings while she was away, as he knew Emma would want him to do. Henry had

seemed pleased by that.

Dinner was a silent, lifeless affair, with barely a word exchanged between them. His mother was like a dark shadow hanging over them, seeming to care nothing for the children's feelings at all.

He and the children had met in the drawing room afterwards to play cards and agreed that Miss Emma's smile and sweet presence was greatly missed at table.

That night, Robert found himself restless and unable to sleep, as had so often happened since Emma had been gone. He got up, dressed himself, and went out into the garden for a cigar. He found himself inevitably drawn to the bench where they had sat together and almost kissed. How he wished they had. Things might be very different now. It made his heart, what was left of it, ache to think of the lost opportunity. I want her by my side, he thought. He allowed himself to imagine them being married, but it was difficult. Marriage was still a hard thing for him to consider.

Isabel had hurt him so much, broken his heart and made him into a fool. Even for a woman as sweet and loving as Emma, he didn't know if he could ever get over that.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Emma rubbed her eyes wearily as she stood over the stove stirring a pot of chicken stew she had made for their supper. It was a far cry from the luxurious fare she had enjoyed at Dalwater, but it was the type of light, nourishing food the doctor had recommended for her father. She hoped he would try a little of it.

She had little appetite herself though. Sharing the vigil over their father was draining for both her and Elizabeth, and all Emma really wanted to do was to fall into her bed and sleep for as long as possible.

“Is it nearly ready?” asked Elizabeth, coming into the kitchen with a tray of tea things from upstairs.

“Yes, I shall be ready to dish it up in a few moments,” Emma relied, taking the pan from the stove, and setting out some china dishes, spoons, and some slices of bread to complete the meal. “You have a

rest, dear. I'll take it up to him. How is he?" Emma asked.

"The same. I don't think the medicine is really doing him any good, you know."

Emma sighed as she ladled the stew into the bowls. "I know, but we must pray and hope for the best," she said. "Why don't you sit down and have your supper? You'll feel better once you've had something to eat." Elizabeth sat at the table, and Emma served her one of the bowls with some bread.

"Thank you, Emma. Things are much better now you are here. I don't know how I managed on my own," she said, spooning up the stew. "This is delicious. Let's hope father is tempted, a bowl of this will do him so much good." She ate in silence for a while, while Emma removed the dirty tea things from the tray, washed it, and reset it with their father's supper. Then, Elizabeth suddenly said, "I don't think he's going to get better, Emma, not unless he can see the specialist."

“I know, dear, but you know we can’t afford that at present. I’m sorry you had to find out about our finances this way. I hoped to prevent it by working, but I have failed. I only have few shillings left in my purse.” Emma had gone into town earlier that day seeking a loan, but it seemed everyone she applied to know about their father’s debts stemming from the bad investments. She had been refused by them all. It had been a bitter disappointment to her and Elizabeth. The girls were at their wits end, not knowing what to do next.

“We could sell something else,” Elizabeth suggested.

“What?” Emma asked, picking up the tray to take it upstairs. “We have already sold the last of the jewelry Mother left us, and that didn’t raise very much. It would better to take in a lodger or sell the house and move somewhere smaller.”

“Father is too ill to leave. It would kill him,” her sister said bluntly, and Emma nodded, knowing Elizabeth was probably right.

“I have asked for my outstanding wages to be sent on, if the duke

will do it, that is. He is a very kind, thoughtful man, so I am hopeful he will," she said. "Anyway, I shall take this up to Father now. I'll give him his medicine too and be down once he's sleeping." Elizabeth nodded and continued with her supper.

Emma had gone halfway down the hall when there was a sharp rap at the front door. Wondering who on earth it could be at such a late hour, she hastily put the tray on a side table, smoothed her hair, and went to open the door.

She was surprised to see a well-dressed, middle aged gentleman with bushy whiskers standing on the step. He carried a black bag in his hands. He tipped his hat courteously.

"Good evening, do I have the pleasure of addressing Miss Emma Fletcher? he asked.

"Yes, that is me. What can I do for you, sir?" she asked, wondering why he was here and how he knew her name.

“I have come to see your father. I understand he is very ill with heart trouble, is that correct?”

Emma frowned, puzzled. “Yes,” she said slowly, “but how do you know that, sir, if I may ask?”

“My name is Dr. Frazier. I specialize in treating heart conditions, and I have been asked to attend your father and give him any necessary treatment.”

“I think you must be mistaken, Dr. Frazier. I think I know what has happened. Dr. Kennedy must have asked you to call. He recommended that Father see a heart specialist but, unfortunately, we are without the means to pay you, so we must decline your services at present. I am sorry you have wasted your time.”

“Ah, I was told you might say that. You see, Miss Fletcher, I have been tasked by the Duke of Dalwater to call and examine your father. He has already arranged for my bill to be paid. So, you see, there is no reason to refuse my services on those grounds.” He smiled at her

kindly.

Emma almost staggered back into the hallway, she was so surprised. She struggled to compose herself. “Oh, the duke! I see, please, in that case, do come in, Dr. Frazier. I will show you up to my father’s room directly.”

Once she had taken the doctor upstairs, Emma excused herself and ran down to the kitchen, where Elizabeth was making a pot of tea. “Was that someone at the door? It’s rather late for callers, isn’t it?”

“You’ll never guess who it is,” Emma told her excitedly. “It’s a Dr. Frazier, a heart specialist, and he’s come to see Father. The Duke of Dalwater has sent him … and he’s going to pay the bill!”

“Why, it’s a miracle!” Elizabeth exclaimed, clutching her breast. “Your duke must be a very kind man indeed.”

“Indeed. It is very unexpected, but he is a generous man. But, Elizabeth, I think we had better hear what the doctor has to say first.

We must be prepared for it to be bad news."

After half an hour, the doctor came downstairs. Emma and Elizabeth waited in the hall, both on tenterhooks to hear his verdict.

"I've examined your father, and I have concluded that, though he may seem very frail and ill at present, his heart is actually recovering." The girls breathed a deep sigh of relief. Dr. Frazier continued. "The bed rest and plenty of sleep is helping him, and I think I can say with some confidence that, if he continues as he is and with no further sudden attacks, he will likely make a full recovery." Nobody could have been more surprised than Dr. Frazier when the two young ladies threw their arms around him and wept with joy.

Chapter Thirty

The sun had not quite risen, but Robert was already up and dressed for a day's riding. Theo had kindly invited him, Abigail, and Henry over to join him at his estate for the day. Although Robert had thought of going alone, he realized it would be selfish.

The three of them had been riding every morning since Emma had been away, and he saw no reason for today to be any different. Abigail and Henry still needed careful handling, and a change of scene over at the Elsby estate would help take their minds of Emma's absence.

He went to find them and was surprised to find them dressed and ready to go with him. But he was puzzled to see the pair standing and hugging each other on the front lawn. They appeared to be looking up at the sky. He looked up and saw the last of the stars fading into the sunrise. Were they looking at the stars? When he approached them, they looked at him and smiled. Whatever they had been doing, it

seemed to have given them some consolation, for they both appeared quite calm.

"Have you had some breakfast?" he asked them. They nodded.

"Yes, Lucy had it ready for us, as she knew we were going out early with you, Uncle," Abigail said, her face tranquil but pale.

"We're looking forward to it," said Henry. "I like the duke, he's very kind and friendly, and he has lovely horses. But I wish Miss Emma were here."

Robert ruffled the boy's hair affectionately. "I know, it won't be quite the same without her, but we must try to make the best of it. That is what she would want us to do."

"Have you got the sugar lumps, Henry?" Abigail asked her brother. He pulled a paper bag from his pocket and waved it. "Good. Then, let us go, Uncle," she added.

They took a carriage ride to Elsby Manor. Abigail and Henry's mood noticeably lightened as soon as they arrived at the estate and were greeted warmly by Theo. They admired some of the horses out in the fields and then went to the stables, where their mounts for the day were being saddled. It wasn't very long before they were out in the open air, riding up the broad green flanks of the gentle hills surrounding Theo's property.

Robert stayed alongside Henry, who, he noticed, was becoming an increasingly competent rider. Abigail and Theo rode side by side a little way ahead, keeping up a constant stream of conversation. Indeed, Robert couldn't help noticing they never seemed to run out of things to talk and laugh about.

It reminded him of chatting to Emma at the ball and made him feel a little sad. He wasn't concerned about their budding closeness. He trusted his old friend to treat his niece with respect and look after her properly. It gave him a good feeling to see the growing attraction between the pair.

He wondered if Emma knew of it. Now he had grown closer to the children and learned more of their close bond with their governess. He had discovered Emma had often been the recipient of their confidences. Had Abigail's obvious liking for Theo been one of those confidences? It made him see why they felt her absence so keenly and how much he had to learn about his wards.

As he watched from a distance the developing relationship between his niece and his old friend, Robert couldn't help envying their pleasure in each other's company. It reminded him of the dance he had shared with Emma and the special connection he had felt with her afterwards. How he had longed to hold her and complete the kiss they had almost shared that night in the garden. Then, his mother had interrupted and forced him to dance with Lady Beatrice. It had been another wasted opportunity keeping them apart.

After they got back from their long ride, it was midmorning. Robert was pleased to see some color in the youngster's cheeks. They led their horses back to the stables and stayed there a while, talking to the

stable hands about the various horses. Gradually, Abigail and Theo gravitated toward each other again, and Robert lounged against a stall, watching Henry feed sugar lumps and red, shiny apples to each of the horses in turn.

Suddenly, Robert recalled the time he had first laid eyes on Emma in Covent Garden. She had been carrying a bag of apples when he had knocked into her. He recalled how the apples had fallen out of her hands and rolled down the road. That day, he had felt there was something different about her. And he had soon discovered she was, indeed, very different to many of the young women he met amongst the *ton*. She was virtuous, unassuming, uninterested in material things. She knew what was valuable and what was not. He wanted to be with her, he realized, more than anything else. He loved her. It was that simple, and he was angry with himself for letting his old insecurities created by the disastrous engagement with Isabel to hold him back from true happiness.

The next morning, he left in his carriage for Whitehaven, hoping for the best.

Chapter Thirty One

For Emma and Elizabeth, it was the best breakfast they had enjoyed for a long while. Next to them at the table, eating toasted bread, was their father. Emma was relieved and pleased to see that he had color in his cheeks at last. He was still frail, but he was definitely on the road to a full recovery.

And it was all thanks to Robert, the Duke of Dalwater. Until Dr. Frazier had come to see their father, she and Elizabeth had worried constantly about what was going to happen, thinking the worst.

Just knowing that their tender care was working, even if they couldn't see it at first, and that their father was going to recover, set their minds at rest and took a great burden from their shoulders.

However, although she felt happier about her father's health, she knew there was still a long road to travel until he completely

recovered. Therefore, returning to London was out of the question. She had reluctantly accepted the fact, and though her heart ached with missing Abigail and Henry and the special bond they shared, she would never be able to take up her old position as their governess.

Accepting it had been very hard, and she had shed many tears in private over her loss. But the harsh realization had forced her into practical action. In the last week she had been into town searching for suitable employment opportunities. She had been interviewed for the post of receptionist at a surveyor's office, and the gentleman there had seemed to be impressed by her.

She had hopes she might have been successful in getting the position and was waiting to hear the outcome. If she got it, it would provide the family with a small but regular income on which they could live if they were economical.

Elizabeth was at the stove making coffee, the delicious aroma filling the small kitchen. Lucy Brown had sent the packet from Dalwater, parceled up with long letters from Abigail and Henry. It had also

contained two five-pound notes, more than her wages owed, sent by the duke. She was enormously grateful, but she knew the money would not last long, with creditors chasing payment of their father's debts.

It would have to be carefully managed to eke it out for as long as possible. It was just another reason for Emma to appreciate her friends at Dalwater, but also to miss them dearly.

"Here you are, Father," said Elizabeth, pouring the hot liquid into cups and bringing one over to her father. "And for you, Emma."

"Thank you, Elizabeth," she said, accepting the cup with a smile. She took a sip. "It's delicious!" It was also heartening to see her sister looking so much better. Now their father was improving, both the sisters were getting a better night's sleep, and the change in their mood was remarkable, despite their financial worries.

They were enjoying the luxury of a second cup of coffee when someone knocked at the front door. "I'll go," said Emma, thinking it

might be the butcher's boy with an outstanding bill to be paid. She wanted to pay it herself, as she hadn't told either her father or Elizabeth about the money the duke had sent.

"Coming," she called, hurrying down the hall, smoothing her hair and dress. She opened the door and was not at all prepared to see the person standing there, a bag of apples in his hand.

"Good morning, Miss Emma. I have brought you some apples." He held out the bag, and she took it with nerveless hands, staring into his warm, hazel eyes, eyes she had never thought to see again. "To make up for the ones you lost in Covent Garden." Smiling at her, he swept off his hat, and she saw the tousled ash-blond curls beneath. The handsome face was so familiar, so dear to her, that she dropped the bag of apples and threw herself into his arms.

Chapter Thirty Two

“How long have they been in there?” Emma asked for the fifth time as she paced up and down the parlor floor.

“An hour and a half, I think,” Elizabeth replied. She was seated on the sofa by the fire, working on embroidering a new pair of slippers for their father.

“Shall I make more tea?”

“Emma, please, sit down. You’re making me nervous too. We’ve had three pots of tea already! I think I shall drown if I drink anymore.”

“But what are they talking about in there? And why is it taking so long?” She continued to pace, twisting her fingers in agitation.

Just then, the door to their father's study opened and the Duke of Dalwater stepped out. Mr. Fletcher appeared in the doorway behind him. Both men looked supremely relaxed.

"Elizabeth," Mr. Fletcher called to his youngest daughter. "Would you mind coming in here for a moment, please?" Elizabeth looked surprised, but she put her work aside and rose to her feet.

"Of course, Father," she said, exchanging a look with her sister before disappearing into the study and closing the door firmly behind her. Emma and the duke were alone.

Emma felt a crowd of butterflies rise inside her, echoing the fluttering of her heart. She ceased her pacing, but her look of nervous agitation remained on her face as she stared into the eyes of the Duke of Dalwater. He took a step across the room and was before her in an instant. Emma trembled at his closeness, feeling his warmth, and scenting the fresh tang of the cologne which was so familiar to her.

"Emma," he said, taking her hands in his and stilling their fidgeting

immediately.

"Your Grace," she replied, her voice shaking. "Robert." He smiled at that and looked deeply into her eyes, pinning her to the spot.

"Emma, I must first tell you that I no longer believe it was a mistake when I ran into you and knocked you over in the street that day in Covent Garden. In fact, I now know it was meant to be, and it was the best day of my life. Since that very first time I laid eyes on you, I knew there was something special about you. I think Fate threw us in each other's paths that day because we were meant to be together. And the proof of that is that you appeared a day later as the governess of my wards." Emma's trembling had ceased, and she was gazing up at him with rapt attention, her eyes wide with wonder.

"And now, I must tell you how very much I love you and want you to come back with me to Dalwater."

"You want me to come back…?"

“Yes, but…” She gasped as he got down on one knee and gazed up into her eyes. “I don’t want you to come back as a governess, but as my future wife, and a mother to Abigail and Henry.” For the first time, she saw nervousness in his eyes, and her heart went out to him, with all the love it had held for him for so long.

“Oh, Robert! I never dreamed … it is a miracle! Of course, I want to come back. And I want nothing more than to be your wife, and a mother to the children,” she breathed, her eyes wide, her face alight with joy. Robert sprang to his feet and took her in his arms.

“That is wonderful, my darling Emma. Thank you for saying yes! It means so much to me and the children. They will be so happy! But now, let us have that kiss we have been waiting for for so long.” And kiss they did, passionately and for a very long time.

Epilogue

Robert and Emma crossed the wide front lawn at Dalwater arm in arm, heading for the figure seated on horseback a few hundred yards away. The figure waved, turned the horse toward them, and began a fast canter in their direction.

“Who would have thought young Henry would make such a good rider for his age. All those lessons paid off eventually, but I must admit, I had my doubts at times,” Robert laughed as the rider drew close and expertly reigned in the magnificent black stallion a few feet away. He leaped from the saddle, letting the glossy beast free to crop the grass.

“Hello, Uncle, hello, Aunt Emma,” Henry said, laughing happily as he came up to his surrogate parents, admiring his horse. “I said I’d bring Valor to see you, and here he is, in all his splendor. Isn’t he

magnificent?" He embraced Emma and kissed her cheek.

"I always had a feeling that Valor would be one of your best friends here," Emma said with a wide smile, watching Henry's face.

"Indeed, my boy, he is magnificent. I have never ridden him, may I?" Robert asked, going up to the horse and rubbing its neck. Valor whinnied appreciatively.

"I'm not sure; he can be a little skittish if you don't know how to handle him," Henry said in a humorous tone.

Robert feigned shock. "Do you mean, you insolent young fellow, that I cannot control him? Do you forget who taught you to ride in the first place?" Henry laughed again.

"No, Uncle, of course not, but you are getting on a bit in years now, an old married man, and all that." Robert shook his head in disbelief.

“Can you believe this whippersnapper, Emma? After all, I’ve done for him!”

“Well, I don’t know about you, Robert, but I certainly shan’t be riding him. He’s enormous.”

“Don’t worry, Aunt, you can always bribe him with sugar lumps and apples,” Henry teased, making and them all laugh.

“That strategy works with horses and children, I’ve learned,” said Emma, smiling broadly. “I never forget my bag of sugar lumps when I go to Elsby. The horses there love me.”

“And how are things at Elsby these days? I can’t believe that Abigail and Theo have been married for six months already. What a lovely wedding it was,” Emma said wistfully, “it seems like yesterday.”

“Oh, they’re two happy little love birds. Theo loves being ordered around by Abigail, and she teases him mercilessly. As you probably know, they’re away in Kent for a few days, visiting his parents.

Speaking of weddings, what's this? I hear about you having a party for your first anniversary."

"Oh yes, it's all being organized as we speak," said Robert, "but it's going to start when Abigail and Theo come back. It's our anniversary on the morrow, and we're having a quiet celebration, just the two of us, aren't we, darling?" Robert said.

Emma smiled up at him, her eyes filled with love. "Yes, it will be lovely and … romantic. Well, are you coming in for some tea, Henry? It's getting a little too hot out here for me. Lucy has made a fruit cake, your favourite."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world. I'll just take Valor round to the stables. They can give him a good rub down. We had quite a good gallop over here from Elsby, didn't we, Valor?" Robert led the horse over to Emma. She rummaged in her pocket and drew out some sugar, which she offered to Valor. He munched it up, then nuzzled her gently.

“I think I’ve made a friend for life,” Emma joked, patting the horse’s fine, velvety nose.

Henry went off to the stables with Valor, and the couple went inside to the drawing-room, where a substantial tea had been laid out for the three of them. They sat together on the sofa, and Emma poured the tea.

“I can’t get used to the fact that Henry is growing so fast,” Emma said. “I feel I can’t order him about as I used to. I’m not sure I like it.” Robert laughed.

“Well, I’m rather worried he’s going to be taller than me in a few years. Then I’ll know I am the old uncle.”

“You know, I’m a little worried about our anniversary party. I think we should invite your mother and her new husband. I’m sure she misses her son and would like to make peace, don’t you think. After all, she was only doing what she thought best for you and the family,” Emma said. Robert leaned over and kissed her.

“That’s what I love about you, Mrs. Campbell. You’re such a loving, forgiving person. I suppose she has tried to mend fences, but she needs to do more than merely write a letter. I want her to come here and apologize to you in person.” He thought for a moment. “Alright, let’s send them an invitation and see what happens. They’re only in Bath, so it’s not far to travel. If she is as contrite as she says in her letter, perhaps I’ll forgive her.” He smiled at Emma, making her laugh.

“That’s what I love about you, Mr. Campbell. You’re so loving and forgiving,” she said, leaning over to kiss him back.

Later that night, as they were getting ready for bed, Emma was about to get under the covers when she saw a large envelope resting on her pillow. Wondering what on earth it could be, she picked it up.

“Robert, what is this?” He was slipping out of his robe and getting into bed. He patted the covers next to him. “Come here, and I’ll

explain it all to you." She got in beside him, still clutching the mysterious envelope, and he held her close.

"Is it for me? Can I open it?" she asked.

"It is a little anniversary gift for you, my darling, to show you how much I adore being married to you. I think it is something you will like very much." She opened the envelope and pulled out some papers. She studied them closely for a few minutes. Then, she sat up.

"Robert, is this … is it what I think it is?"

What do you think it is, my love?" He grinned at her.

"I think it's a deed … to an apple orchard. A very large apple orchard."

Robert nodded. "How observant. It's exactly that, Emma. You are now the proud owner of your very own apple orchard."

“Oh, Robert,” she cried. “It’s absolutely the best present I have ever had.” She threw herself into his arms, and they kissed warmly.

“Well, my wonderful husband, I might just have a little anniversary present for you, too.”

“And what might that be, beautiful lady?” he asked, wrapping his arms around her. She smiled.

“I’m expecting a baby, our baby.” She giggled as he leapt out of bed, his eyes wide.

“Are you sure, Emma?” he asked, his eyes wide.

“Of course, I’m sure, silly. I saw the doctor yesterday, and he confirmed it. By next March, we shall be parents.” Robert picked her up and whirled her around until they were both helpless with laughter.

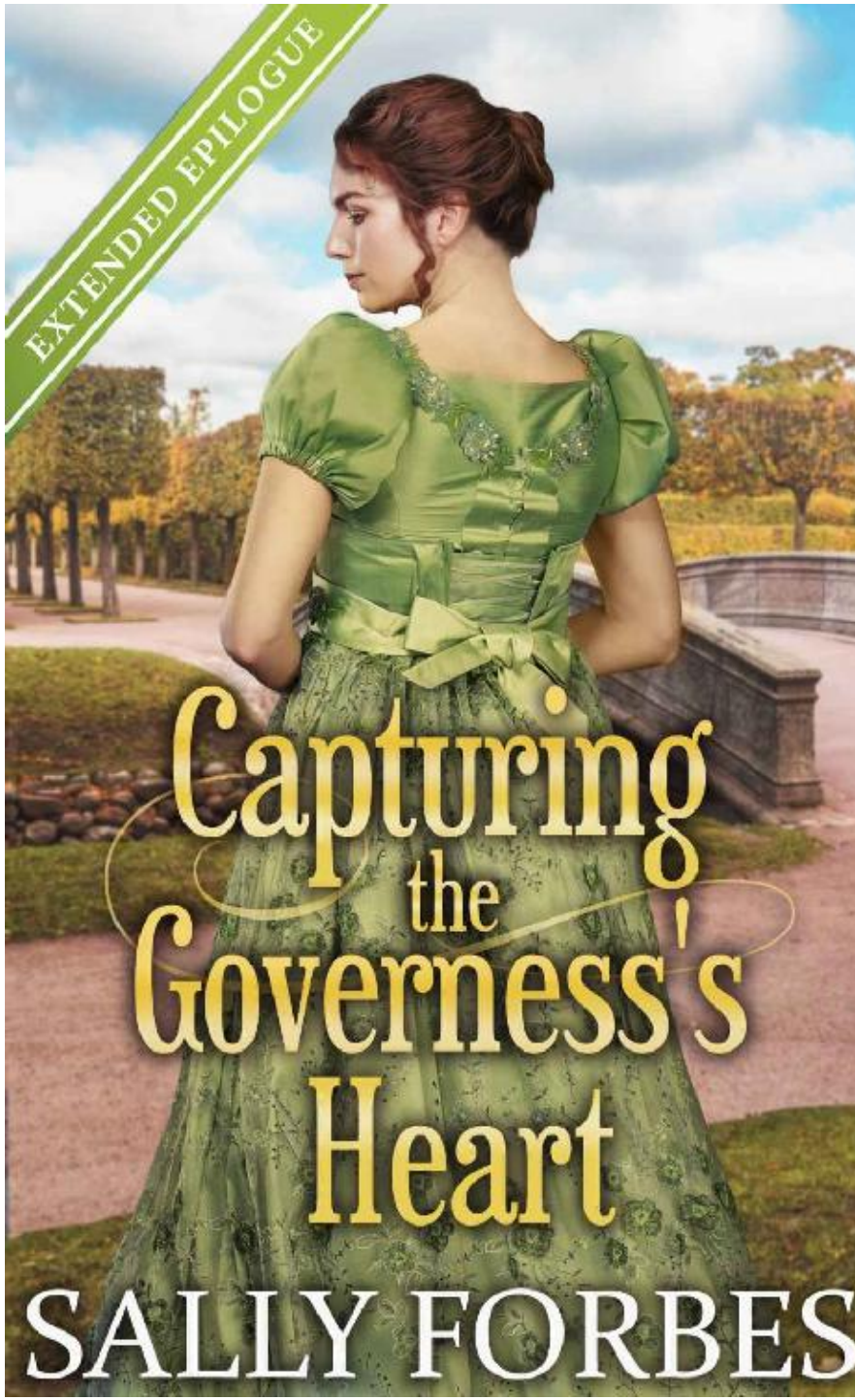
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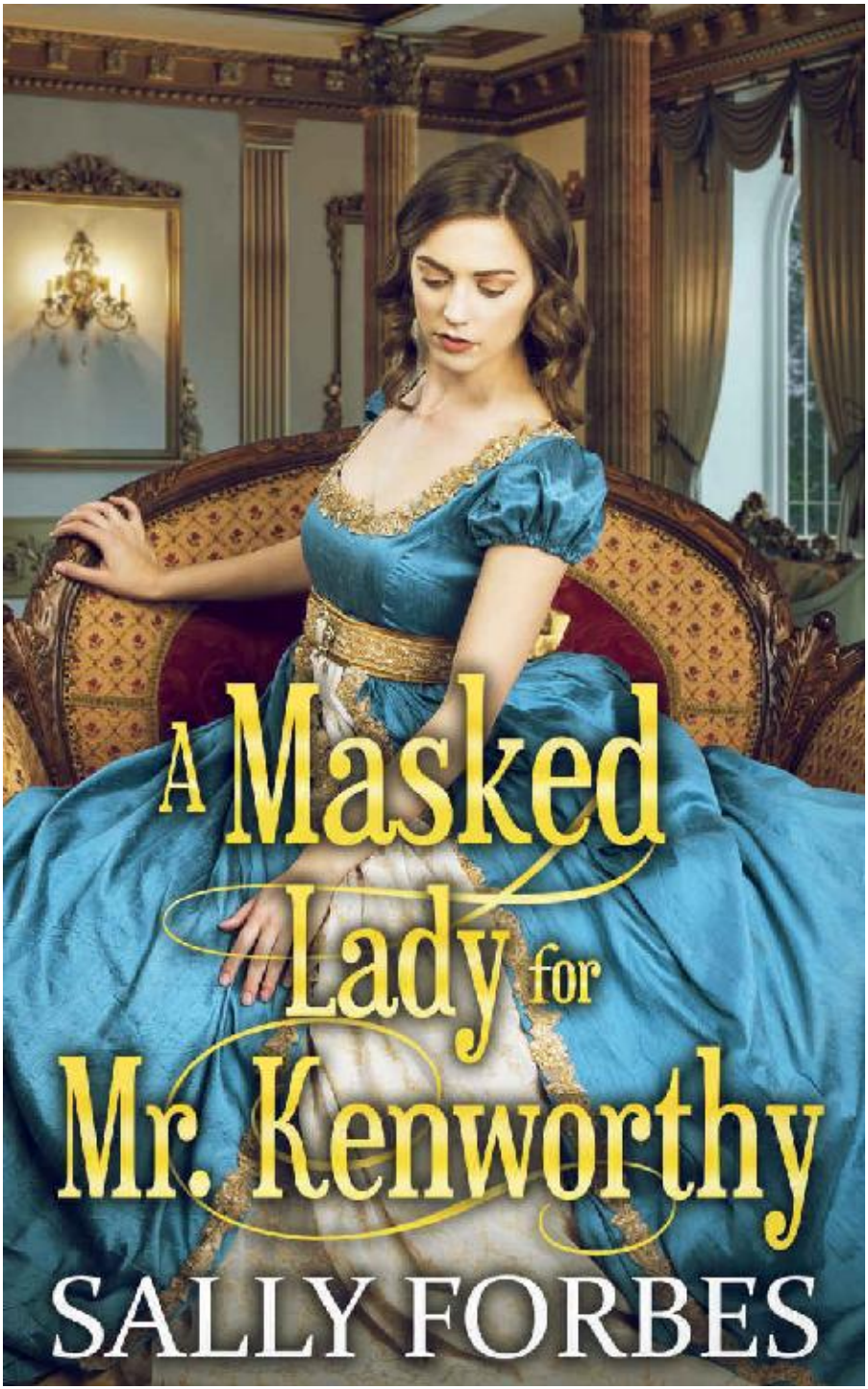
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A Masked Lady for Mr. Kenworthy

Prologue

“Lady Faye,” said a voice from the open doorway of the drawing-room.

Faye Winters looked up from the pianoforte, at which she had idly been staring for the past few hours, to see Huston standing in the doorway. Faye offered him a small but warm smile, despite knowing that it was of no use.

“Yes, Huston?” she asked.

The man made a bitter face as she spoke his name, as she had anticipated he might.

“Lord Welborn requests your presence in his study immediately,” he said.

Without waiting for Faye to respond, Huston turned sharply on his heels, his nose high in the air, and exited the room.

Faye sighed, shuddering at hearing her cousin addressed as the lord of her family. Until eighteen months ago, her father had been the Earl of Welborn. When he passed away suddenly from a terrible illness, her cousin, Mayson Winters, had inherited her father's title. At first, Faye had thought she and her mother would be well cared for and that her cousin would be a comforting presence in the house after her father's death. She had never been more wrong about anything in her entire life.

Upon arriving at Welborn Manor, Mayson's first act had been to dismiss every servant the family had had for years. He had left only the cook, Bretta, in his employ, and Huston, whom he had brought with him from his residence in London. Faye and her mother had disliked Huston from the moment they met him, but they thought

that, perhaps, he was displeased at having to leave his home and follow his master to Welborn Manor. But they quickly discovered that both Huston and Mayson were very unpleasant men. They seemed to lack empathy and affection for everyone apart from one another, and they seemed to make every effort to make Faye and the dowager countess as unhappy as possible.

However, nothing could compare in the way of horror to the terrible news which Mayson had delivered to Faye in his first week at the manor. When Faye had inquired as to why he had terminated the household servants, he had told her coldly and without sympathy that her father had left her and her mother practically destitute. He claimed to have saved them from the poorhouse by dismissing the servants and that she should be grateful he had allowed the cook to remain. He further claimed to have brought Huston with him so that she and her mother would not be forced to tend to all the household duties themselves. At the time, she had been too stunned by the tidings that her father had left them with so little money to be anything but grateful that Mayson was there to help her and her mother.

She had always believed that her father was a shrewd businessman and handled his ventures well. They had never wanted for anything when he was alive, after all, and she could not imagine him ever getting himself into debt for any reason. At the very least, she would have thought her father would have told her mother if they were in such trouble. He was a proud man, but he was also honest to a fault. It made no sense that they could be poor without any prior knowledge of their situation. But her cousin had insisted that all her father's ledgers proved what he was saying. She had at first thought that Mayson would pull them from debt and restore her family's fortune. But she had seen no evidence that he was making any progress toward doing so, and she was filled with doubt as well as disdain for her cousin.

With another heavy sigh, Faye made her way out of the room and

toward Mayson's study. She did not bother trying to appear pleasant. He was indifferent to her, at best, no matter how sweetly she spoke to him. She was a benevolent, charitable, good girl, and most correct in her conduct, with manners that were held to be a standard of good breeding. For the time being, she chose to focus on being polite and professional with her cousin and on getting away from him as quickly as she could. Besides, she needed to see about her mother.

She rolled her eyes as she reached the closed study door. It was just like Huston and Mayson to summon her to a room and then close the door. She knocked firmly so as not to give her cousin a reason to pretend he did not hear her, as he often did.

"Come," said Mayson, his voice muffled by the heavy wooden door.

Faye shuddered at the sound of his voice, pushing open the ponderous door and stepping inside.

“Next time, perhaps you could try not to tear down the door by pounding on it so hard,” Mayson said before she had even reached the desk.

Faye clenched her teeth, resisting the urge to lower her glance. She squared her shoulders and looked at her cousin, who was still staring down at some papers on his desk.

“Huston said you wanted to see me?” she asked, her voice carrying an impatient edge.

Mayson looked up sharply, raising an eyebrow at her.

“I should think you might want to watch your tone, Cousin,” he said, lowering his eyebrow in favor of a sly smirk. “You would not want to be disrespectful to your guardian, would you?”

Faye bit her lip to suppress a biting remark. She cleared her throat and set her jaw.

“I beg your pardon, Cousin. What can I do for you?” she asked. Her tone was marginally more polite, but she refused to acknowledge his question.

Mayson seemed pleased with her sullen tone. He settled back in his seat, his smile changing to one of extreme satisfaction. He reached for

one of the desk drawers, not taking his eyes off his cousin. Faye held his gaze, despite the sudden sense of dread that began to burden her as Mayson's grin widened.

"Please, sit," he said, gesturing with his other hand to one of the chairs in front of the desk.

Faye gave him a small, tight smile.

"No, thank you, Cousin," she said. "I must go see Mother as soon as we've finished."

Mayson's expression did not change. However, movement from the hand that had been fishing in the drawer caught her attention. When she saw what he was holding, she gasped, her knees nearly collapsing from beneath her. Her cousin lifted a shiny, silver pistol onto the desk,

pointing the barrel in her direction and using it to gesture to the seats once more.

"I insist, young Faye," he said. "Make yourself comfortable."

Faye sat, more out of inability to continue standing than to appease her cousin. He was taking pleasure in her fear, but Faye could not be outraged by the fact. She had not known that Mayson even owned a gun, let alone whether he could actually use it. Something in his hooded gray eyes told her he was almost certainly more than capable of doing so. He tossed his head back and laughed. Her fear-stricken mind could not help thinking about how handsome her cousin was, with his broad shoulders and aquiline nose, if Faye could not see the malice and evil in his every feature. She shuddered as she continued to follow the pistol with her eyes. She was grateful he did not seem to be waiting for her to speak because the gun had her mouth frozen shut

Mayson chuckled, nodding.

“I see you understand me now, Cousin,” he said, sneering. “That means I do not need to say that you must do exactly what I tell you.”

Faye glanced up at Mayson, failing to control the trembling that had taken over her body. She had no idea what he was about to say, but she knew the only response she could give in that moment was a weak nod of her head. Her cousin, still sneering, nodded once more.

“Very good,” he drawled, as though praising a young child. Then, his expression became a scowl. “Now, listen well. I have made arrangements for you to attend the masquerade ball the Marquess of Turlington is soon to be hosting. Do not get excited, though, little

Cousin. This is far from benevolence on my part. You will be going for the sole purpose of getting into Lord Turlington's study unobserved and stealing a black leather journal he has in his possession. I fancy you are unacquainted with such matters of stealth, but you will do as I say."

Faye's mouth fell open, and she stared at her cousin with equal parts of fear and disbelief. She shook her head slowly, his words temporarily making her forget all about the gun in his hand.

"What in thunder are you about, Cousin? You must be mad," she breathed. "You cannot ask such a thing of me."

Mayson shifted his pistol hand, instantly refreshing her memory of its presence. He narrowed his eyes at her and snarled.

“You shall guard your tongue, little girl. I am not asking such a thing of you,” he said. “I am demanding it. And what’s more, you will do as I say.”

Anger began to flood through Faye. It was one thing for him to come in and treat her and her mother so poorly. It was a whole different matter to try to get either of them involved in criminal activity. She glared at him with angry defiance, balling up her hands at her sides.

“And what will you do if I do not?” she asked. “Shoot me, right here in my home? You would never get away with such a crime. You and I both know that.”

To her horror, Mayson’s smile widened. The pistol made a clicking sound in his hand, and he raised it ever so slightly.

“Do not be so sure of yourself, little Cousin,” he said. “You might be surprised what one can get away with. Especially if there are no witnesses to certain events.”

Faye shook her head, bewildered.

“Mother may be unwell, but she would certainly hear a gunshot,”

she said, scoffing. “And she would know very well that I did not shoot myself.”

Mayson laughed wildly.

“You innocent little girl,” he said. “If your mother does not receive the care she needs, she will not live long enough to bear witness to anything.”

Faye furrowed her brows, momentarily confused. She looked at her cousin’s face, and the smug knowingness of his expression gave her the answer. She gasped, covering her mouth with her hands, shaking her head in disbelief.

“You would not dare,” she whispered, already knowing what her cousin’s response would be.

Mayson nodded, smirking.

“I would indeed,” he said. “If you do not do exactly as I tell you, I will see to it that your mother never receives any kind of medical treatment ever again.” Faye stared at her cousin, furious with the tears that began to stream down her cheeks. It was one thing for Mayson to know he had deeply upset her. It was another for him also to gain the satisfaction of seeing her cry. It was clear to her that her cousin was a terrible, cold monster. It was also apparent that she truly did not have a choice.

As unable to answer Mayson as she was unwilling, Faye merely lifted her chin, scowling at her cousin despite her trembling lip and tear-stained face. Then, she turned on her heel and stormed out of the

study. Mayson's howling laughter followed her out of the room and down the passageway told her he understood perfectly that she would do as he demanded, even though she had not verbally agreed. The thought made her ill, and she rushed up to her bedchambers before her stomach could reject the meager food she had attempted to eat that day, right there on the hallway floor. She wanted to check in on her mother, but she did not want the dowager countess to see her in such distress. How could she ever tell her mother what Mayson had just demanded her to do for him? Could she ever look her mother in the eyes again if she did it? As she realized she had no choice, she slid down onto the floor, her back against the door. She covered her face with her hands and spent the next few hours crying softly.

Despite exhausting herself crying and worrying about the task Mayson was forcing on her, Faye lay awake in her bed that night, unable to close her eyes. She kept trying to tell herself that things would be all right if she refused Mayson's demand. However, she knew her mother's condition had worsened drastically over the past

few weeks, and she was barely surviving as things were. If Mayson cut off her medical care, as he had threatened to do, she would surely die before Faye could find another way to take care of her. Her heart began to ache as she thought about her late father. How could he ever have left them in such a dire situation? And how could he have ever allowed them to end up under the guardianship of such a horrible man? She bit her lip and tried to reign in her blameful thoughts. Surely, her father had not known her cousin was involved in any sort of criminal activity. Even if her father's businesses were not running as profitably as she had believed they were, he would never have turned to any sort of criminal activity to support his family after his demise. Would he?

Faye shook her head to rid herself of such thoughts. She refused to believe her father would ever be so irresponsible with her and her mother's wellbeing, even if he had allowed his businesses to flounder. Perhaps, he'd had plans to rebuild his fortune, but he had died before he could see them through. Whatever the case, she knew he had loved

her mother and her dearly and that he would never have purposely jeopardized their safety once he was no longer there to protect them. Besides, none of that mattered now. What mattered was her mother and how close she was to follow her husband into death.

As the reality crashed down onto Faye, she began to cry again. She had watched her mother rapidly turn into the hollow, weak husk of the woman she had once been, who now lay ill in a bed which appeared far too large for her. She had witnessed the countess's once lush, light-brown hair turn gray in a matter of months and seen the light gradually dim in her sky-blue eyes. The dowager countess, who had only recently looked more like an older sister than Faye's mother, now resembled her grandmother. And now, she had to face the real possibility that her mother might not live to see another Christmastide. She loved her mother dearly, and there were still so many times to look forward when she had always dreamed of having her mother there by her side, such as her wedding day and the birth of her own children. It was unbearable to think that those times might

now never come to pass. And the only way she could prevent such a devastating thing as losing her mother from happening was to comply with Mayson's demands.

Faye shuddered, wiping vainly at the tears in her eyes. It was one thing for Mayson to be a criminal, but for him to blackmail her into joining him in his life of crime by holding her mother's life over her head was abhorrent. It showed Faye that her cousin had no remorse, that he was indeed what one would call evil. Only a man with no soul could be so horrible to his own flesh and blood and take pleasure in their suffering. She wished desperately that there was someone she could turn to who could help her and her mother out of their predicament. But, with her father gone and no other relatives that she knew of, there seemed to be no one to rescue them both before it was too late.

Chapter One

Thomas Kenworthy slowed his pace and brushed a strand of ash-blond hair out of his blue-green eyes. He held his breath, covering the lower half of his face with one hand to regain control of his breathing before he took another step forward. After a moment, he lowered his hand, running it through his circle beard in a vain attempt to soothe his raw nerves. At just under six feet, he had to slouch to pass beneath a broken archway down the dark alley he was traversing, but he did so with practiced stealth. The smells assaulting his upturned nose were nauseating, but he forced himself to take another quick, deep breath and hold it as he continued with his mission.

A sudden movement ahead of him in the alleyway refocused his attention. Thomas narrowed his eyes and watched the stranger he had been tracking, careful to make a note of his every movement so as not

to lose sight of him. He saw the stranger was now walking a bit faster, so he picked up his own pace. As he walked, he scanned the ground, searching for any holes or obstacles littering the broken road before him, so he did not step on something that would make a sound and alert the stranger to the fact he was being followed. His heart leapt into this throat when the man stopped abruptly and looked over his shoulder, and Thomas had to press himself against the wall beside him. For a horrible moment, Thomas was sure the man had detected him, and he held his breath.

After a moment, he glanced toward the man and saw he had knelt and was making a tugging motion. Thomas realized the fellow had gotten his trousers caught on a jagged piece of brick and was trying to free himself with relief. Thomas waited until the man began moving again before stepping away from the wall and continuing his pursuit. He saw the alley was coming to an end soon, and, once more, Thomas stopped. He did not know this part of London well, and he could not see clearly enough to tell if the path stopped at a dead end. A moment

later, the man ahead of him turned to his left and disappeared around a corner.

Thomas moved faster, walking on his toes to keep his footsteps quiet. He could not afford to let the man get away from him, but he did not wish to run straight into him either, should the path be blocked or come to a sudden end ahead. He clung to the wall as he reached the corner, slowly peeking around it to assess the situation. The man was walking several paces ahead of him, and Thomas could see, just ahead, the little light that had illuminated the road thus far was all but gone. If he was going to act, it must be now.

He crouched low and sped up his steps, remaining as quiet as he could. He reached the man from behind without being detected and wrapped his arm around the fellow's neck. Fortunately, he caught the man completely unaware and was able to reach into his jacket pocket

and pull out the cloth he had previously doused with laudanum before the man had time to understand what was happening. It took little effort to place the cloth over the man's mouth and nose, and he only struggled against Thomas's grasp for a moment before his body began to go limp.

Thomas held the cloth in place for another moment more to be sure the laudanum had taken effect. Then, he lowered the unconscious man to the ground. He took a moment to look around to ensure they were still alone in the alley. He could not calculate exactly how far away from his carriage he was, but he prayed it was within earshot. He gave a single, high-pitched whistle, the signal for his driver to bring the carriage to his location. He expected to have to give the signal again, listening carefully for an indication that the driver was struggling to find him. However, a moment later, his carriage appeared from around the same corner he had rounded before grabbing the stranger. He sighed, wiping sweat from his forehead with the palm of his hand, as the coach came to a stop in front of him.

Thomas made quick work of lifting the man into the landaulet. At first glance, the man had seemed light enough to handle on his own. However, as Thomas hoisted the man onto the floor of the carriage, he realized he had grossly underestimated the man's weight. With a sigh, he shoved the man's legs into the coach, groaning as he felt a terrible pull in his back. He paused for a moment, rubbing what he was sure would be a horrifically sore spot the following morning. Then, he positioned the man on the floor and slammed the landaulet's door shut as quickly as he could. The coach began moving shortly thereafter, and Thomas sat back on the bench, wincing as the pain began to radiate throughout his entire back. *This is a cursed business.* Thomas cursed his superiors for tasking him with such a difficult mission, but he knew the man would prove very valuable to the current case the War Office had assigned him. *They could have assigned someone to help me, though,* he thought bitterly, wincing again as the carriage's rough progress shot bolts of searing pain through his back.

“Look,” the man, who had told Thomas his name was Jones, said, trembling, “I have told you everything I know. I swear. I am not mixed up in anything deeply enough to know any more.”

Thomas nodded slowly, glaring suspiciously at the man. In truth, he believed him. But one could never be too confident that one had gotten all the information from someone until they had their informant, voluntary or unwilling, properly frightened.

“My tastes don’t run in that direction, lad. Why don’t you tell me again?” he asked. “Let us make sure you don’t suddenly remember something new.”

The man sighed, his breath as shaky as his body.

“The Marquess of Turlington,” he said hoarsely. “There are rumors circulating that he is working for the French as a spy.”

Thomas nodded, reciting the man’s words with him silently as he spoke.

“And how can I be sure these rumors are reliable?” he asked.

The man shook his head.

“I do not know for certain,” he said. “No one does that I know of. But he has been spotted carrying around a black leather journal from time to time, and he has been seen getting very testy if anyone gets too close to him while he has it. One man swears that he saw a page of it one day when walking past a table in a club where the marquess was sitting, though.”

Thomas nodded again. So far, the man’s account matched the few details he and Rupert had managed to gather since beginning the case. But he wanted to be sure the man’s story did not suddenly change. Rarely was that the case in such interrogations, but too much was at stake for Thomas not to be positive the man was speaking the truth.

“And what did this man say was on the page?” he asked.

The stranger sniffed.

“I have not the remotest clue, but it is said it showed a list of French names,” he said. “The man did not make a note of any of them, as the marquess noticed his presence and glared at him, but he did see a large note written in the margin beside some of them which read ‘Report to.’”

Thomas took a deep breath. He refrained from exhaling it in a sigh

of disappointment. He had truly hoped the man would give up the names listed on the journal page, but it was becoming clear to Thomas he truly did not know any of them. He knew there was a chance that what the man had said could be misinformation calculated to mislead. There was no shortage of rumors in London on any subject people found interesting enough to gossip about. However, Thomas had also heard from other sources that the marquess did seem to favor one certain book and was very protective of it. And this was the most information about the book Thomas had garnered so far, so he would have to make do with it.

“And you give me your word this is all you know about the matter?” he asked at last.

The stranger nodded fervently.

“Good God, I swear, sir,” he said. “That is everything I know.”

Thomas nodded slowly, allowing his stern, professional persona to slip away. He gave the man a warm smile. This man was, after all, not a criminal. At least, not as far as Thomas knew. His presence in that seedy alley indicated he was most likely a gambler, but that alone did not make him part of London’s scum.

“Very well,” Thomas said calmly. “You are free to go.”

Thomas spent much of the following day in bed. His back, as he anticipated, was bothering him immensely. He used heated cloths and some herbal pain medicine he had at home from a previous injury to ease the pain and tension in his back as much as he could. By that evening, he felt almost fit enough to tackle the important task that awaited him. He rose from his bed and freshened himself up, adding a splash of some nice cologne. Then, he got himself dressed, taking great care with the mask, which matched his outfit. Once he was ready, he took one last look at himself in the looking glass. Although he had not chosen it for himself, he had to admit he looked quite dashing in the midnight-blue suit. Even the matching mask complimented his slightly triangular-shaped face rather than making him look awkward or out of place. Though he had not thought so at first, he was now certain he would blend in well with all the other guests in attendance at Lord Turlington's masquerade ball. Thomas himself was no lord or nobleman, but he had worked with many of the *ton* over the years. He knew he could act the part, and now he would truly look the part, as well.

Satisfied, he hurried down the stairs, where the butler opened the door and led him to the waiting carriage. Inside, Rupert, the Viscount Daleshire, and Thomas's partner and friend already waited for him. When Thomas entered the carriage, Rupert looked up from the paper he had been studying, no doubt a review of the notes for their mission that evening. He smiled approvingly at Thomas, tucking the paper snugly into his coat pocket.

"You clean up rather nicely, good sir," he said, his green eyes sparkling mischievously. "Aren't you glad you let me pick out your outfit for this evening?"

Thomas rolled his eyes, but he could not help smiling.

“Your taste is, as always, far better than my own, my lord,” he said, giving an exaggerated half bow from his seated position on the bench across from his partner.

Rupert laughed heartily.

“It is too bad, though, that I could do nothing about that face of yours,” he teased.

Thomas glared at him but joined his friend in a chuckle.

Rupert signaled for the carriage to begin moving. Then, he looked back at Thomas.

“Shall we go back over the plan for tonight?” he asked.

Thomas nodded. He knew the plan, but Rupert was always one to overprepare rather than the opposite. Though his partner could be a bit of a handful sometimes, he took his errand very seriously. He had to, as he was considered one of the best operatives the War Office had ever employed.

Rupert gave a single nod and then continued.

“As soon as we arrive at the ball, we will go our separate ways,” he said. “I will mingle with as many people as I can to see if I can gather any more tidings on the marquess. You may mingle as you please, but I want you to keep an eye out for anything suspicious. I shall be keeping a close eye on Lord Turlington, but if he should slip away from me, you must be on alert. I do not expect him to do anything this evening, not at his own ball. But he might be meeting with someone to plan something. A packed ballroom would be the perfect place for him to do so, after all, especially his own.”

Thomas nodded again, imagining everything as Rupert spoke.

“And I am to be prepared to slip into the marquess’s study at just before eleven o’clock,” Thomas said, reciting the words from memory. “Once I am inside, I am to search for, and retrieve, a thick black journal.”

Rupert nodded.

“Precisely,” Rupert said. “I plan to meet with you at five minutes before eleven, so I can keep watch for you. Or, at the very least, keep Lord Turlington busy for a few minutes, so I can be sure he does not leave the ballroom for any reason.”

Thomas nodded once more and sighed.

“It is strange how suddenly he has managed to bring himself back from the brink of bankruptcy,” he mused.

Rupert shrugged.

“Such is the life of a good criminal,” he said. “He claims that a recently deceased uncle on his mother’s side of the family named him as the sole heir to his entire fortune. But stranger still is that no one close to the marquess seems to know anything of any such relation.”

Thomas shook his head slowly. He already knew that information, as well, but he had spent a great deal of time leading up to that evening trying to make the details add up. He supposed it was plausible that what the marquess had said was true. But surely, at least one person would know something about this alleged uncle. Instead, though, the information they had received about the marquess seemed to indicate his sudden fortune had been obtained by far less legal means. And it was Thomas's and Rupert's job to find out exactly what they were. The book Thomas was assigned to find would contain all the answers they sought. Therefore, Thomas was determined to find that book and turn it into his superiors at the War Office. And absolutely nothing would stand in his way.

Chapter Two

Faye nervously smoothed out her dark-blue silk dress and readjusted the matching mask for the hundredth time since she had arrived at the ball. Even though she was dressed just as all the other guests were, she still felt out of place. Ordinarily, she would enjoy such an event. But, given the task she was there to perform, there was no possibility of her enjoying herself, not even for a moment. Nevertheless, she put on the best smile she could muster and held her head high as she pretended to look calmly around the ballroom.

Though she avoided making eye contact with any of her fellow guests, she took in every detail of the room around her. Despite her dread and nervousness, she was impressed with the ballroom of Turlington Manor. It was the largest ballroom she had ever been in, seeming to stretch on impossibly far in every direction. Its grandeur was breathtaking, reminding Faye of what the ballroom at the King's palace must look like. It was clear that no expense had been spared

when the room was constructed or on its maintenance, as the rich green of the walls was fresh, as though it had been painted just days before the ball. The silver pillars lining the walls of the room were just as bright and fresh as the walls themselves, and the four chandeliers hanging from the ceiling were apparently made from solid gold and far larger than any she had ever seen in any manor in London.

The decorations for the ball were extravagant, as well. The lord of the manor had had what appeared to be hundreds of small masquerade masks made in varying colors and hung throughout the room. Even the black drapes had the small masks wound around them, nearly all the way up to the ceiling. The dishes at the refreshment table, which ran the entire length of the room, were solid silver and crystal, and the food spread upon the table was nothing short of a feast. In the center of the table was a giant ice sculpture that appeared to be a bust of Lord Turlington himself. Faye could not help rolling her eyes. It seemed the man was as full of himself as he was seedy and untrustworthy. *Not unlike Mayson,* she thought bitterly, as she gave her head a shake and began to search for possible ways to

exit the ballroom unseen.

Faye continued making her way through the crowd. The room seemed to be packed, and it took her ages to make very little progress through the room. All around her, young women smiled shyly and laughed coquettishly at young gentlemen, who were inviting them to dance. She sighed, thinking back to her debut ball two years prior. Her very first season, especially her debut, had been positively magical. She had enjoyed herself at every ball she attended, and she never wanted for gentlemen to dance with her. It had all changed, however, when her father had fallen terribly ill. She had not minded taking the rest of the season off to concentrate on helping her mother care for her father. But now, she could not help wondering how different things would be if he were still alive.

“Excuse me, my lady,” said a deep voice from behind Faye, startling her.

Faye whirled around, trying to force herself to keep her lips together until she had assessed the situation. Her mind first told her that, somehow, someone had figured out that she was up to something sinister. But she quickly realized that was quite ridiculous. She had not so much as looked at anyone, and she had not yet made a break for any of the doors leading out of the ballroom. But the man before her, wearing a very striking midnight-blue suit, would quickly catch on to her suspicious behavior if she did not find a way to calm herself quickly. She cleared her throat and beamed at him in a way she prayed looked authentic.

"Good evening, my lord," she said, curtseying to give herself a chance to fix her expression. "I was so lost in thought, and you gave me quite a start."

The gentleman bowed when she straightened up and gave her a warm, charming smile.

“I beg your pardon, good lady,” he said smoothly. “My intention was not to frighten you. In fact, I had hoped for the opposite reaction, as I was hoping you might honor me with the next dance.”

Faye blinked, surprised. Even though she was at a real ball, she had not anticipated actually being asked to dance. She had been so dedicated to her mission. She had left no room for any other thoughts. Now, she must continue with considerable acumen. She had to make a quick decision. Dancing with a man would detract from the time she had to complete her task. However, a skittish, abrupt refusal could draw the wrong kind of attention to her. The man would surely remember a woman who jumped at a simple human interaction and fled from a mere request to dance. It would serve her better to blend

in and behave as all the other guests were doing.

She gave the man another, more relaxed smile, even though her heart was pounding in her bosom. She held out her hand and nodded.

“I would be delighted, my lord,” she said.

The man took her hand, placing it on his arm as he led her onto the crowded dance floor. Faye cursed herself as their dancing position placed her far away from the doors she had been surveying. She would have to make the trek back through the crowd once more, which would waste even more time. But she knew she must make the best of it. After all, surely Mayson would not care how long it took her to commit her crime. As long as she left the ball with the black journal, he should be happy enough.

As the song began, Faye looked into the gentleman's blue-green eyes. They were especially alert and, although they regarded her cordially, there was a sort of detachment in them. She gave him a warm smile, trying to think of some way to strike up a conversation.

"By the by, this is a lovely ball, is it not?" she asked.

The gentleman nodded, glancing at her briefly.

"It is," he said, though his voice lacked any real enthusiasm.

Faye nodded, pondering at the man's aloofness. Perhaps he was shy and merely needed to be properly engaged to open up. She offered him another brilliant smile. She glanced down at his suit, and an idea struck her.

"I could not help noticing that our outfits look as though they were cut from the same piece of fabric," she said.

The gentleman looked at her, at last flashing a warm, charming smile.

"That is one of the reasons why I asked you to dance," he said, giving her a wink.

Faye blushed. Now the man's eyes were lit up with interest, and she could see how beautiful they really were. His ash-blond hair bounced as they twirled, and the muscles along his angled jawline twitched as he smiled.

Faye raised her eyebrows, pleased that he was at last responsive.

"Oh?" she asked. "There was more than one reason why you asked me to dance?"

She looked at him expectantly, but it was soon clear he had not heard her question. She studied his face, frowning as she noticed he seemed more intent on surveying the ballroom than her. She bit the

inside of her cheek to stifle a sound of displeasure. Surely, he had not asked her to dance simply to make another woman jealous? She did not think herself the most beautiful woman in London, but she felt she was pleasant enough looking, and she was a very skilled dancer. Even though meeting gentlemen was not the purpose of her attendance at the ball, it would be insulting to think that the only man to dance with her that evening had only done so to get another young lady's attention. And, if his mind was otherwise occupied, why should he ask anyone to dance at all?

She cleared her throat pointedly, thinking it might pull the man's attention back to her. He did not seem to hear her again, either because of the loud music or his wandering thoughts. Frustrated, Faye did the only other thing she could think of. She switched her weight to the wrong foot for that particular dance and purposely stepped on the man's feet. That worked instantly. Faye could not help feeling a sense of gratification as the gentleman whipped his head toward her, his eyes wide and confused.

“Are you alright?” he asked, glancing down at their feet, which had simultaneously stopped moving across the floor.

Faye feigned her best sheepish expression and bit her lip, nodding slowly.

“Oh, forgive me,” she said, removing her hand from his shoulder and placing it on her cheek. “How clumsy of me.”

The strange expression on the man’s face surprised Faye. Rather than giving her a sympathetic smile, he appeared to be studying her carefully. His jaw was set, and his eyes regarded her with almost calculating alertness. Her heart thumped fiercely in her bosom as she

stared into his eyes. They were such a beautiful shade of blue-green, and she found herself quickly getting lost in them.

“Hm,” the man said, bringing her back to herself. “Are you sure you did that by accident?”

Faye blinked, stunned and confused.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked.

“Forgive me, but I cannot help thinking that, perhaps, you stepped on my foot intentionally, my lady,” he said. “You are, so far as I can tell, a very gifted dancer. I am struggling to believe you could have

made such a blunder accidentally."

Faye bit her lip to keep her mouth from falling open. Had he managed to read her mind? There was no possible way that a perfect stranger should be able to tell she had done it on purpose.

Don't be silly, Faye, she scolded herself silently, *no person in the world could possess such a gift.* Quickly, she realized she had been silent a moment too long. She lifted her chin defiantly, eyeing the stranger with as much indignance as she could muster.

"Good grief, I would never do such a thing on purpose," she said, more harshly than she had intended. "I merely lost my concentration for a moment, and my foot slipped."

The man studied her for another moment. It seemed as though he was preparing to say something more, and Faye swallowed. She realized how foolish she had been to do such a thing. Now, the gentleman would surely remember her, and he might keep an eye on her for the rest of the evening.

Once more, she chastised herself for having such mad thoughts. She simply imagined things, of course. With the task she had ahead of her, she was allowing her mind to play tricks and run completely away with her. That would not do. If she did not find a way to get herself under control, she would surely botch the mission completely. Her mother's life depended on her success that night, and she could not afford to forget it, even for a moment. She held her breath and waited to see what the man was going to say to her.

The final chords of the cotillion resonated just then, and, instead of speaking, the gentleman smiled. He offered her his arm and escorted her off the dance floor. Faye returned his smile, unable to suppress the relief she felt that he had been unable to question her further. Though, beneath that relief came a slight wash of disappointment. It was not until the gentleman thanked her warmly for the dance and wished her a good evening, then almost instantly vanished into the crowd of guests that Faye realized butterflies were flitting about in a frenzy in her stomach. Something about him had excited her, and she could not help wondering who he was and wishing she had met him at a regular-season ball rather than at a party where everyone wore masks.

When Faye realized where her thoughts were leading her, she bit her lip and scolded herself once more. She had no business having such thoughts about anyone at present. She had not come to the ball to find a potential match for love. She had come to save her mother's life, and she could not allow her thoughts to stray as they were doing. Faye looked around the ballroom, giving a firm shake of her head until her eyes found the tall, ornate clock against the wall by the

entryway into the room. She craned her neck to see it was just before eleven o'clock, and Mayson had told her the ball would be ending at around midnight. She only had one hour to find the book he wanted, and she prayed it was enough time.

As calmly as she could, Faye began the slow trek through the crowded ballroom once again. As she had earlier in the evening, she avoided eye contact with the guests, training her gaze on the door through which she planned to slip out. She sent up silent prayers that she would be successful in finding the black journal and would make it out alive to give it to her cousin. She made herself a promise to try to come up with a plan for getting herself and her mother away from Mayson once the evening's business was finished. She had no idea how she would ever succeed with such a feat, but she knew that she and her mother were in greater danger with every passing day so long as he was around.

Her stomach twisted into knots as she saw a tall, heavy door at the end of the aisle. After a few running steps, she reached the door. She glanced over her shoulder and, when she did not see anyone paying special attention to her, she slipped out into the grand lobby of Turlington Manor. The instant noise reduction almost caused her to jump because the pounding of her heart was suddenly louder than anything she could ever remember hearing. The manor's interior was more luxurious than she could ever have imagined. Directly in front of her, she could see two grand staircases leading up to the same floor, which had been designed on a scale to allow some dozen persons to walk up abreast. She could hear the wood snapping in the fire burning in the stone hearth between the two staircases.

Servant's voices came to her ears from the staircase on her right hand, and she quietly tiptoed past the left staircase that led up to the manor's second floor. With the briefest glance around her to ensure there were no servants around to bear witness to her actions, she slinked around the corner and into a long hallway.

Mayson had described the interior of the marquess's manor to her in detail, so it did not take her long to find the door to the study. She took a deep breath, but she could not stop her hand from trembling as she reached for the study door key Mayson had given her when explaining her task.

She squeezed hold of the key so as not to drop it, steadying the hand holding it with her other as she guided it toward the lock. She forced herself to remain calm. She had made it this far, and soon enough, the entire thing would be over. Then, she could return home, secure in the knowledge that her mother would get the care she needed, and Mayson would, for the time being, be satisfied. With one final deep breath, she quietly turned the key in the lock and pushed her way inside the study.

If you liked the preview of "A Masked Lady for Mr. Kenworthy", you can get your copy now for ***FREE with Kindle Unlimited*** here.

About Sally Forbes

Inspired by her grandmother who was a regency historical romance author, Sally loved romance from a very young age. After all, she decided to turn her hobby to a professional level.

She was born in the United Kingdom, of an American father and a British mother. When she was ten years old, they moved as a family to Chicago, where Sally made her dream come true to study Literature at the University.

She is riveted to a wonderful man who gave her two adorable daughters to be proud of. A lovely Labrador is part of the family as well.

In her free time, Sally prefers to spend time with her family. She loves

arts, especially theater and opera. Also, she is a big fan of Jane Austen.

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